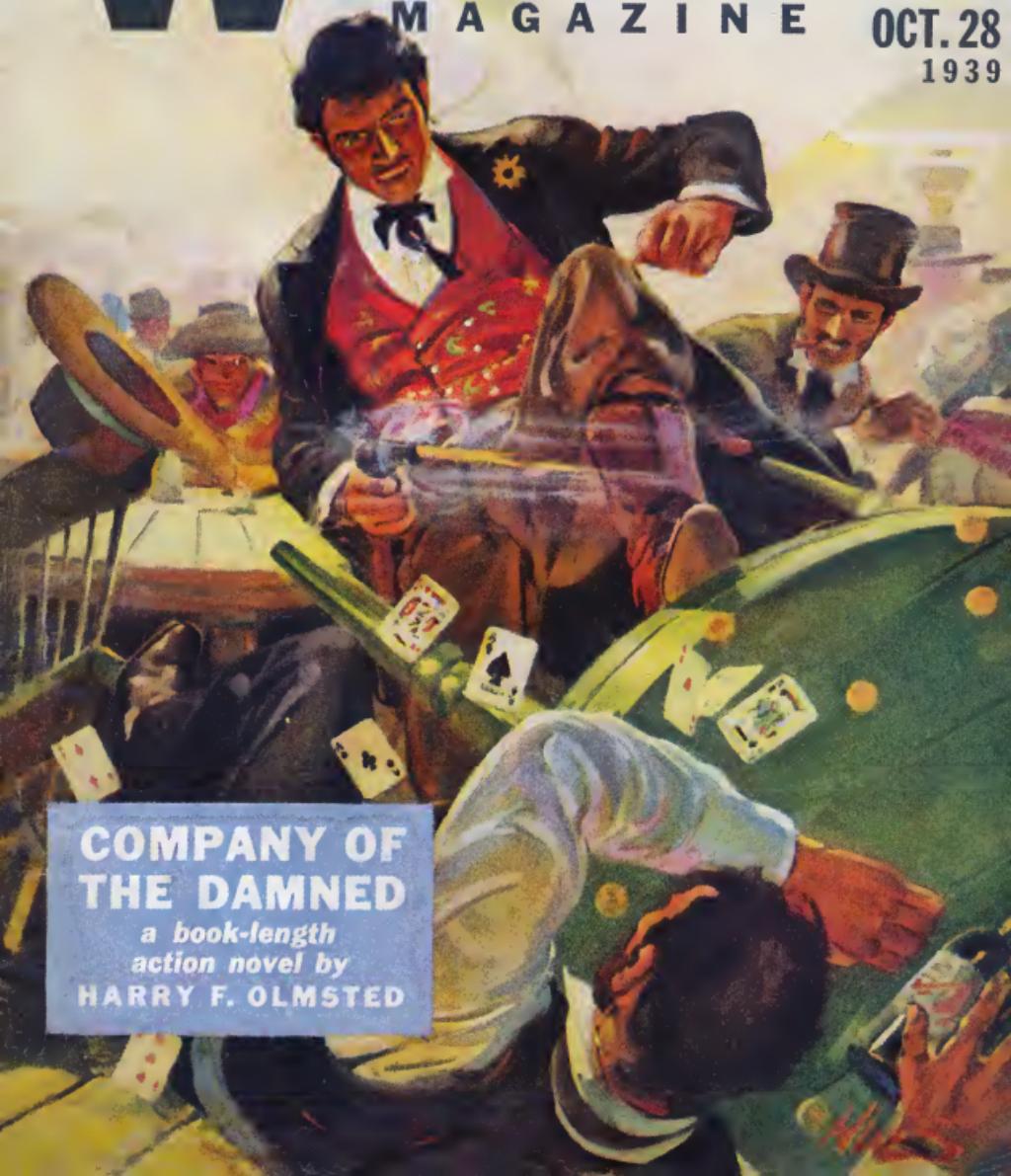


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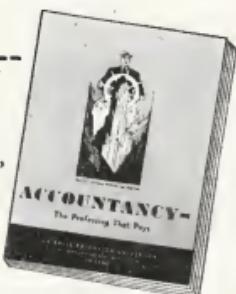
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CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER 28, 1939 VOL. CLXXVII NO. 5

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BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

COMPANY OF THE DAMNED Harry F. Olmsted 9

Manned by derelict river rats, skippered by a discredited tinhorn, the *Mona Paisley* had her engines tuned for the greatest gamble the Big Muddy ever witnessed. . . .

A SERIAL

IRON MALEMUTE Frank Richardson Pierce . . . 103

Third of Six Parts

Many a railroad is paved with the bodies of men who gave their lives to build it. Is Cahoose Riley to be the first victim of the new venture?

SHORT STORIES

DON'T CROWD MY GUN W. Ryerson Johnson 55

When Marshal Luke Hill gave advice, any hombre who wanted to save his bacon listened with both ears cocked. . . .

DEAD MAN'S VENGEANCE S. Omar Barker 63

—that was what old Chisel-tooth was destroying when he chewed up that apple box.

GUN PURGE AT TENTROCK Peter Dawson 75

The Tentrock was about due for a clean-up of double-crossers—and no one knew on what side Phil Royer was triggering his six-guns. . . .

SCARECROW IN THE SADDLE Norman A. Fox 85

That crowbait stranger knew he was riding his crowbait horse into plenty of trouble but he'd never grab leather while he had a chance to save young Cotton Wayne from being stampeded!

WESTERN STORY FEATURE

THE STORY OF THE WEST Gerard Delano 65

Episode LXXXVII in the making of the cattle country. . . .

DEPARTMENTS

THE ROUNDUP The Editor 6

GUNS AND GUNNERS Phil Sharpe 95

MINES AND MINING John A. Thompson 97

THE HOLLOW TREE Helen Rivers 99

WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE John North 101

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

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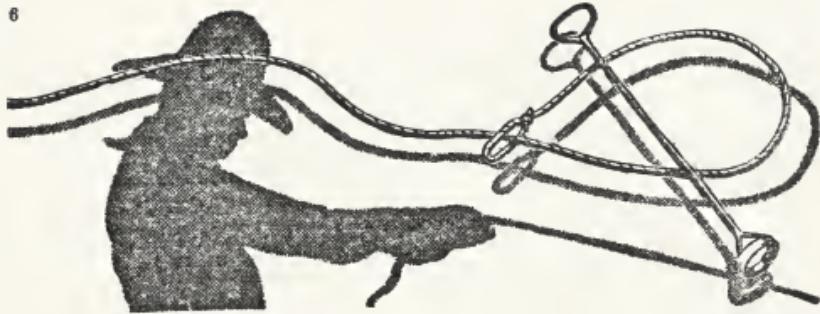
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The R o u n d u p

THE many friends of Cherry Wilson will be happy to learn that she is recuperating from her severe illness of some months ago and will soon be hard at work on what, we hope, will be one of her exciting tales which Western Story readers always list as tops in the tally book. Cherry and her husband, Bob, have gone back to Nature in a big way, according to her letter from, as she describes it, "a place of no address."

"Here we are," she writes, "at the far-northern tip of beautiful Priest Lake, in the wilds of Idaho, far from the nearest auto road or radio, cozily camped in a little log cabin fronting a beach where the sand is as fine and white as sugar. Across the lake and up and down pile range after range of spruce-clad mountains, and behind us there is mile upon mile of virgin forest. Absolutely no one to be seen but an infrequent ranger with his mule pack string. No sounds but the wind's song in the trees and the lake's washing on the sandy shore. Such a place to rest and regain one's enthusiasm—a place as I've often dreamed of, but never before found."

And we can't imagine any better medicine all around than just such a mountain cabin in the pines—a place such as all lovers of the out of doors might dream of, "a place of no address."

Stuart Hardy, whose serial, **MAD-MAN'S MESA**, made such a hit some months ago, is takin' a pasear in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. He writes that there's another serial comin' through the chutes any day now.

In next week's Western Story—

Tom Roan heads the list with **HANGTOWN**, a stirring full-length novel. Satan himself seemed to be cutting up capers in the Thunder River Canyon, where a mysterious criminal known only as The Mask had a whole range terrorized. If you like your stories peppered with plenty of action and mystery, you'll find this thriller tops.

Kenneth Gilbert, B. Bristow Green, Glenn H. Wichman, Norman A. Fox, and Frank Richardson Pierce are only a few of the other names on the tally book for next week's big issue. Don't wait too long to put your brand on a copy.

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COMPANY OF THE DAMNED



By HARRY F. OLMSTED

CHAPTER I

PARIAH

THE atmosphere in the St. Louis Travelers' House had grown to a dangerous tenseness. Three men were bucking Yancey Valliant's game, and all three were losing heavily. Colonel Woodford, down from Fort Fetterman on leave, played too cautiously to win. Lieutenant English, bound for Washington after a tough Indian campaign on the Wyoming plains, attacked the gamble with the same bluff that had helped a handful of troopers to whip the Cheyenne dog soldiers. The youngest of the three, Dahl Paisley, played a reckless game, plunging on hunches and backing every hand far beyond its worth.

Paisley had come into the gamble with a surprising amount of gold. Now it was about gone, and his increasing surliness and the desperation in his eyes worried Yancey. He had seen trouble break before from such a temper. But though it made him watchful and alert, he was caught short when the break came.

Young Paisley, at his right, had just showed down a losing hand. Yancey was reaching for the stakes when Paisley struck his hand aside with an angry gesture. Paisley stood up, his face flushed with passion. His finger leveled accusingly.

"You damn cheat!" he raged. "No wonder you win, holding out cards on us."

Yancey struggled to hang onto the ragged ends of his temper. The young fool was drunk, a poor loser, and insane now with jealousy and frustration. It was a situation that had caused many a killing over a gambling table, but Yancey was not a killer.

"Sit down!" he said sternly. "You're making yourself ridiculous."

But the sudden silence of the onlookers was ominous. Everyone was looking at Yancey. Colonel Woodford rose to his feet slowly.

"A serious charge, Paisley. Prove your words, sir."

The captain of a river packet, brass-buttoned and beefy, moved closer to the table. "Since when must a gentleman prove he's no liar?" he demanded. "Dahl Paisley is the son of Captain Hiram Paisley, who's known and respected by everyone between here and Fort Benton, Montana. His word is good with me, against"—he looked at Yancey—"this cheap tinhorn."

Yancey turned cold inside. He had wondered if young Paisley was kin to Captain Hiram, skipper of the crack packet *Mona Paisley*, and owner of several side-wheelers. And had decided in the negative. Captain Paisley had once plunged into a brawl and saved Yancey from a gang of river toughs. It seemed impossible that he could be the father of a weakling like this young welsher.

Lieutenant English finished counting the cards and lifted accusing eyes. "Fifty!" he announced. "The deck's two short, gentlemen."

"Hear that, Valliant?" cried Colonel Woodford. "Explain this if you can." Men started to crowd in on Yancey. The colonel tried to wave them back. "Gentlemen, please—"

But strong hands were on Yancey, tipping him back. Someone pounced upon two cards lying in the gambler's lap.

"Here's all the proof you need," a man cried. "Paisley, he's your man."

It was an invitation to a duel, the only way such an affair could be settled. But the thought seemed to shock Dahl Paisley. He recoiled,

paling. Reading the youth's fear, the lieutenant drew himself up.

"Valliant has cheated me, too. I demand satisfaction."

NUMB inside, his reputation as a straight gambler gone, Yancey shook off the men who held his arms and met the lieutenant's hard glance.

"I choose not to fight you," he said with weary finality. "This is a regrettable error and you gentlemen may rightfully claim my bank."

Angry muttering swept over the crowd. The lieutenant's face hardened. "Coward as well as cheat, eh?" His palm cracked sharply against Yancey's cheek.

Yancey's temper snapped. His right fist shot out and crashed to the lieutenant's chin. The latter was driven back across the table, upending it.

Amid a roar of voices, the colonel leaped in, reaching for his revolver. Someone shoved him aside. Men took hold of Yancey again and paused to listen to the beefy packet captain's bellowing:

"Let's make an example of this card cheat! Cowhide him, then use his bank to buy him a passage to Fort Benton, where they handle his kind with a quick pistol!"

There was approval in the surge of answering voices. Yancey was whisked outside. Word had spread like wildfire and a crowd gathered, pressing toward the landing; men gone wild. Dimly, Yancey saw familiar faces among them, men who had won and lost at his board, men who hated him and men who called him friend. But there was no friendliness now in those contorted, torchlit faces. Halfway to the river, a thick-bodied wagon freighter leaped into the lead, cracking his long whip.

"The post! Whip him!" he shouted.

The crowd took up the cry. "The post! The post!"

In the front row, as they led Yancey to a lynch-post, were Dahl Paisley and the beefy packet captain who had championed him. And Yancey, gritting his teeth as they stripped him to the waist, bent a scaring glance upon his accuser.

Tight cords, biting into Yancey's wrists, almost pulled his arms from their sockets. Again and again the freighter's leather seared stingingly into his bared flesh. The crowd roared with lusty appreciation of the spectacle. Yancey bit his lips to hold back the groans. He lost count of the blows, felt consciousness all but leave him.

Through it all, he held Dahl Paisley with his damning stare. The youth tried vainly to tear his eyes away. It was as if he were held in mesmeric bonds, bound to confess, with his eyes at least, the part he had played in planting those two cards in Yancey's lap. Until finally, with Yancey's senses wavering, something snapped in Paisley. White-faced, he turned and bowled his way through the crowd. And Yancey, sinking his teeth into bloodied lips, saw him melt into the fog obscuring his vision.

YANCEY'S awakening in the pale dawn was fraught with the stabbing pains of a lacerated back, with the torture of nerve shock and an embittering sense of shame. The bunk upon which he lay quivered with a measured throbbing. Somewhere a bell clang'd and then the vibrations ceased.

For a moment, the swirl and gurgle of water was plain. A roar of voices kept steadily reeding. The bell clang'd again and once more

the pulsations of engines lifted through the bunk. Yancey knew then. He was aboard an upriver packet, banished from St. Louis.

For many minutes he lay there, suffering in mind and body. The tramp of boots beat a steady tattoo outside his cabin. Voices lifted. A woman's pleasant laughter made him feel more than ever the gall of bitter loneliness.

Suddenly, without warning, the door opened and a girl entered the cabin. Behind her was a gray-bearded little man. Startled, the girl paused. "Oh!" she gasped. "He's awake, Ed."

"Easy there, younker," warned the little man, as Yancey lifted to one elbow. "Let's take off that shirt an' fix them hurts."

He moved to the edge of the bunk, grinning. Numb and suffering as he was, Yancey felt the warmth that lay behind that smile and showed so plain in the shrewd eyes.

"What boat's this?" he demanded hoarsely. "An' headin' where?"

"The *Mona Paisley*," replied the little man. "Fort Benton bound. Finest packet on the Missouri run an' named after the finest gal on earth—Miss Mona here."

The girl flushed. "Ed Vermilion, stop that kind of talk." She busied herself removing unguents and bandage from an emergency kit. She turned to Yancey briskly. "You'll feel better, Mr. Valliant, once we dress your back. Turn over, please."

Yancey winced as Vermilion drew off his shirt. Then the girl's soft touch was bringing comfort to his sore back. But why was she bothering to help him, an outcast? She must be the daughter of bluff Captain Hiram Paisley, he realized—

which made her sister to the treacherous Dahl.

They had spread on cooling salve and were wrapping him with strip bandages when a heavy tread sounded at the door. Yancey's glance lifted and met the hot eyes of the packet captain who had sided Dahl Paisley when the latter flung his charge in the Travelers' House. The man took in the scene with a scowl.

"Mona Paisley!" he said peremptorily. "Where is your pride? Go to your room! And you, Vermilion—fine pilot for the passengers to trust, going soft over a criminal."

He moved belligerently into the cabin and Ed Vermilion rose to face him. And, though the captain was a giant of a man, the peppery little pilot showed no sign of fear.

"Don't get the idea you can tell me how to walk, Mr. Hatfield," he said with belligerent sarcasm. "And say, what you doin' here? You're supposed to have the wheel."

Captain Hatfield colored with anger. "The wheel is in good hands," he growled. "My duty was here when Dahl told me you'd brought his sister down to this scoundrel."

Dahl Paisley had entered the cabin after the captain. "You keep away from my sister, Vermilion," he ordered importantly. "Or I'll have to put you ashore. My father—"

"Dahl!" Mona's voice lashed out. "Get out of here. You, too, Captain Hatfield. If and when I need your help, I'll call you."

When they hesitated, Ed Vermilion chuckled. "You deaf, Hawley Hatfield? Move! Both of you. Git!"

Dahl backed hastily through the door. Sputtering, Hatfield followed him, pausing at the threshold.

"Valliant," he said, pointing his finger, "you're a prisoner on this

packet. Try to mix with the decent passengers and I'll have you put in irons. Try to escape and you'll be shot down."

He slammed the panel violently after him. Quietly the girl turned back to her unfinished task. Then, with the pilot helping Yancey back into his shirt, she gathered her things together.

"I've caused you trouble," Yancey began regretfully. "You have my thanks—"

"Don't thank us," the girl said coolly. "I have no sympathy for gamblers. You were hurt and needed attention. I'd do as much for anyone."

She went out and the little pilot, with a friendly grin, followed. Yancey was left alone with a feeling of deep regret. Mona Paisley's lovely face rather than her contempt was seared upon his brain. But her definite rebuff reminded him of the bleak future.

Sometime later, a colored steward brought Yancey a tray of food. "Yo' sho' gets de bes', boss," he grinned. "Miss Mona say to fetch you de cap'n's chicken an' wine from his locker."

The food was tasteless to Yancey, but having eaten of it, he felt strengthened. The wine warmed the chill of his blood. When the steward took the tray away, he slept.

Twilight was darkening the port-hole when he awoke. Feeling renewed, he found his boots, dressed, and stepped on deck. The evening air was fresh and invigorating. Yancey gulped it down eagerly. In answer to his query, the steward grinned.

"Yas suh, we sho' does run all night, long as de moon shines. Got to do it, boss, if Marse Paisley's gwine keep his packets. Ol' debbil

trouble sho' been a-ridin' Paisley boats lately."

In the face of his own trouble, Yancey could feel little sympathy for the Paisleys. He strolled aft. Supper was over and passengers had congregated on deck to talk and watch the yellow moon lift from the troubled wake astern. At sight of the gambler, they fell silent. Smiles faded and they drifted away, leaving him alone as if his mere presence contaminated the place.

Yancey was glad enough to be left to himself, but ugly thoughts tortured him. He toyed with the idea of leaping overboard and losing himself in the wilderness beyond the south bank. But that, he decided, would be suicide. And, for all its rebuffs, life was still sweet to him. Perhaps in roaring Fort Benton he could make a new start, as other outcasts had before him. Drawing a long breath, he steeled himself against the punishment of the six bitter weeks ahead.

CHAPTER II

RECRUIT FOR THE DAMNED

DAY and night, the roiled flow of the Big Muddy flung back from the *Mona Paisley's* churning paddles. Mile after watery mile. Lusty, youthful Kansas City fell astern and the way led north. At Fort Leavenworth, where they stopped for fuel, they were warned that upriver Indians were buying guns and smoking the war pipe. St. Joseph, buzzing with rumors of trouble, held great fleets of prairie schooners against word that it would be safe to embark upon the overland adventure.

In rare moments, between his bunk and the pilot house, Ed Vermilion found time for an occasional word with the ostracized gambler.

And by those acts of plain humanity, the little pilot added fuel to his feud with Captain Hatfield. They wrangled continually, Vermilion never giving an inch. One night, when the engineer, a crony of Hatfield's, was slow in answering bells, Vermilion stormed into the engine



room and laid him out with a single punch. Emerging, blowing on his knuckles, he grinned fiercely and paused to regale Yancey with the worthlessness of captain and crew. Troubled, Yancey protested.

"Look, Ed. You're hurting yourself by having anything to do with me. I appreciate it, but you better give it up."

The pilot bristled like a little terrier. "I'll give it up when you give me cause, young feller. You're no stranger to me. I've heard plenty about you from N'Orleans to St. Louis, an' so far nothin' bad, seeing it was Hatfield an' Dahl Paisley who been doing the talking. But, lad, what about them two aces in your lap?"

Yancey turned and leaned over the rail. "You do the guessin'," he said stiffly. "An' let your conscience be your guide."

Ed Vermilion studied him. Then he grinned, cuffing Yancey's arm affectionately. "That I've already done, boy. Keep your chin up an' your pride down to where you know friends when you see 'em. Not all folks are fools enough to swallow Hatfield's chin slobber."

Moved, Yancey watched the little pilot climb the ladder and disappear. He was starting toward his own cabin when he became aware of Mona Paisley approaching. Startled, he lifted his hat.

"I overheard your talk with Ed," she said swiftly. "Your answer could have meant anything. Yancey Valliant, I want the truth about those cards."

Yancey stiffened, admiring her bluntness against his will. How like old Hiram Paisley she was. Strong, direct, uncompromising. Demanding the truth without a by-your-leave and without committing herself as to how she would use it. Yancey forced a smile.

"Better let dead dogs lie," he murmured. "After all, they caught me with two aces in my lap."

"But why? You've always had a reputation for honesty—"

"Cards are hard masters," Yancey answered. "And greed sneers at a good name."

She nodded, holding his eyes as if she were trying to read them. Then: "I cannot make out whether you're a scoundrel or a gallant liar, Mr. Valliant. Good night!"

THIE rains set in, bringing gloomy days, black nights and a rising river, its swollen breast gorged with drift. Ed Vermilion seemed never to sleep. Day and night he held to his post, his slender shoulders hunched over the wheel, his face gaunt with strain. Once Yancey climbed to the pilot house, offering to spell him. Vermilion refused to leave his post.

But the little pilot was only flesh and bone. At last exhaustion claimed him and his turning over the wheel to another man was a signal for trouble to break. The rudder jammed. The packet slewed in

midstream and drove prow-deep in the muddy bank. No real harm was done except to slow an already slow upstream passage. After that, the engines failed twice, seemingly without cause. Yancey was reminded of the steward's words his first night aboard: "*Ol' debbil trouble, he sho' ride de Paisley boats.*"

Ed Vermilion made no bones about what he called "malicious scamping." Captain Hatfield countered, charging the little pilot with incompetence. Often they were close to blows.

Between St. Joseph and Fort Omaha, two packets of the Missouri Transportation Co. overtook and passed the *Mona Paisley*. It filled Ed Vermilion with rage. He cursed them roundly, then cursed the captain, engineer, and crew of the *Mona*. But Yancey, watching Captain Hatfield, sensed that the man was pleased, rather than disgruntled at being thus disgraced, according to the river code. It didn't make sense to him.

That evening Yancey spoke to Vermilion about it as they smoked together on the after deck.

"Nothin' surprisin' in that," the old-timer declared. "Man an' boy, I've been on these rivers for fifty years. I know the difference between bad luck an' deliberate scampin'. Won't surprise me if Hatfield scuttles the packet if he can't slow me up otherwise."

"But why?"

"Spite! Hiram Paisley gave me this run over Hatfield's protests. Trouble's landed on Cap'n Hi all spraddled out an' he thought— Say, yonder's the wood camp where we tie up to fuel. See you later."

He hurried away and soon the craft nosed toward the west bank, where a beacon fire winked in the twilight. Yancey started forward,

pausing near the engine-room door as the engines continued to thunder, driving the packet straight into the bank.

A feeling of disaster touched Yancey. Vermilion was playing it too close. Where was the bell to reverse the engines? Already warning cries lifted from the passengers forward. What was the matter with Vermilion? Yancey darted into the engine room and found the engineer sitting taut, poised at his levers. Directly over his head, the signal bell swung back and forth. One, two, three—one, two, three. But only a dull, muffled sound followed. "Reverse!" bawled Yancey. "Back your engines, you fool!"

The engineer swung an astonished face. Then the packet swerved and struck. The shock dropped Yancey, hurled him into a bulkhead. As he struck he was conscious of yells, screams, a rending of timbers.

Out of the fog of flickering senses, Yancey emerged slowly. Shaking himself together, he rose and groped his way forward. Stokers were cursing bad burns and abrasions. Passengers clamored angrily, picking themselves up and staring ruefully toward the bow, high and dry on the flood bank. Bitter words flared from the cabin deck.

"Vermilion!" raged Hawley Hatfield. "Look at what you've done, you incompetent jackanapes! You must be drunk!"

The weary little pilot clenched his hands into fists. "I ain't drunk, Hatfield. Nor it ain't that me or you or your rascally engineer ain't competent. When the time comes, I'll tell it to the proper authorities. Blast ye, Hatfield, I all but jerked the bell cord in two, for reverse—"

"You're a liar!" cried the captain. "I'll wager not a man on this packet heard a bell—"

THE passengers were yelling their agreement when Yancey came up to face the two angry men. "You'll lose that bet, captain!" he said quietly. "I heard Vermilion's signal bells, though the bell clapper had been muffled. Your engineer heard it, too, though I doubt he'll admit it. Why do you want this packet aground, Hatfield?"

"There ye are!" yelped Ed Vermilion. "Up to your old tricks, eh, Hatfield? Man, you'd better fix up a good story before I haul you before the river commission."

"Hold your tongue, you lying sneak!" thundered the captain, "or I'll put you in irons. I'll see that the *Mona Paisley* isn't saddled with a pilot who hobnobs with criminals and blackens the names of honest men with—"

"I suggest," interrupted Mona Paisley, stepping forward, "that my brother Dahl verify Mr. Valliant's charges."

"Excellent," said Hatfield, smiling thinly as Dahl went down the ladder. They waited tensely. Ed Vermilion joined Yancey, growling.

"Imagine sendin' that weaklin' down to cheek on an engineer who's out to seamp the boat!"

"But why, Ed?"

"Wish I knewed, younker. But Hiram Paisley knows his bad luck ain't accidental. That's why he's asked me to pilot this paeket. Wish he was here now, the fightin' ol' badger."

A bell clanged sharply, followed by Dahl's voice from below:

"This bell's in good working order and the engineer says it has been all along."

"You see?" Hatfield appealed to the passengers. "Vermilion deliberately ran us aground. It might be carelessness, but seeing he's so thick with this crooked gambler—"

"Put the erooks ashore!" bellowed an adventurer bound for Montana. "I'm tired of delays and I'll guarantee to do a better job of piloting myself."

"Put them ashore! Off the packet with them!" His cry was taken up by other excitable passengers.

Ed Vermilion backed to the companionway, jerking a pistol. "Try it!" he barked. "Come on, my fine-feathered roosters. Here's powder an' ball that says Ed Vermilion won't be put off this man's river till the commission does it—on true evidence. Get back, you big numbskull, or I'll flatten you out!"

Silence fell. Men stood poised and the air vibrated with the menace of a dangerously aroused old-timer.

Planted between the two conflicting forces, Yancey found himself wishing he had the gun they had taken from him. Rage rode him hard and he taunted the Montana-bound man.

"What's holding you boys? Surely not one gun, after all your boldness. Are you a bunch of yapping hounds, too drunk to want truth and too addle-pated to know it when you see it? Vermilion"—he swung on the pilot—"put your gun away. I want this fellow to test himself in trying to put me off this boat."

THE man gulped, his courage vanishing. Yancey looked at him contemptuously, then turned back to Hatfield.

"Listen, Captain Hatfield. You've harped on Vermilion's competence since we cast off. It's plain, however, that the best thing to be said about you is that you're willfully incapable. Any river-boat captain that'll grin behind his hand when a packet passes him—"

"Damn your insolence!" Hatfield burst out. "I'll—"

"Shut up!" Yancey was like rock. "You're no captain, Hatfield, and the facts bear me out. Here we are, nose on the bank, in Indian country, a hundred lives in your care and valuable cargo aboard. Yet you threaten to throw your pilot in irons instead of setting the crew to lightening your boat so you'll be safely off before dark."

"A crooked gambler tells us how to run our packet," jeered Dahl Paisley, coming up the ladder.

"Mr. Valliant's point is good, Captain Hatfield," broke in Mona Paisley. "There's no real harm done if we calm our nerves. Let's all forget our differences and pull together."

Her calm words smoothed things over. Ed Vermilion climbed back to the pilot house. Yancey went below, where the crew were now busy lowering gangplanks and making ready to move cargo ashore.

The bow load, guns and ammunition for the up-river forts, proved heavy and slow to move. It was midnight when the lightened prow jerked free from the sand, the great paddles churning threshing water into foam. The boat shuddered, then seemed to hurtle toward mid-stream. Then, the paddles reversed and the packet nosed slowly to the bank. The planks were grounded and, as weary passengers and crew members moved to load the cargo, Yancey and Mona went on board. At the foot of the ladder the girl paused to look at him. The glare of the banked fires was on their faces, and Yancey was struck by the weariness in her eyes.

"You're very tired," he said gently.

Her eyes held his and, when she

spoke, it was as if she hadn't heard. She said, "I believe in you, Yancey Valliant. Don't doubt that, no matter what happens."

Then she was hurrying up the ladder, leaving him to look after her, profoundly moved. He was still there when Captain Hatfield came up, his ill humor strangely gone.

"Better get some rest, Valliant," he said with unusual courtesy. "I'm going to tie up and finish loading at sunrise. Good night."

He moved away to give the order and surprise stifled Yancey's protest. He wanted to tell the man this lonely spot was a dangerous place to tie up, but it would be so easy to waken the old unpleasantness, and he himself was too tired to face further argument.

Back in his cabin, Yancey threw himself on his bunk and was instantly asleep. Then suddenly it was dawn and he was sitting bolt upright in his bunk, shaking sleep from his eyes. The air shuddered to ragged concussions and blood-chilling yells. The engineer's bell rang insistently for full reverse and the hull shook with the motion of the paddles.

"Indians!" Yancey muttered, and leaped for his clothes.

He was hardly dressed when the door burst in. He whirled. Three shadowy forms leaped at him. Leaping, Yancey caught up a water pitcher, shattered it over a hard head. A man screamed, a curse rapped through the gloom, and fists, rather than knives sought him out. These were not Indians! The knowledge didn't lessen Yancey's will to fight, but there were too many. Punishment took the sting from his blows, the edge from his strength. He went down with someone crashing a boot into his skull.

CHAPTER III

WINGS OF DEATH

YANCEY returned to consciousness, with the throb of the packet's engines timed to the beat of his aching head. He lay in darkness, the smell of flour and bacon and salt pork in his nostrils. Every muscle of his body complained and, in attempting to explore his surroundings, he made the startling discovery that his wrists were chained to the bulkhead.

"Now, what the hell?" he said aloud.

Chains rattled and Ed Vermilion's voice came out of the darkness. "It means, younker, that we're in a split stick. When we was jumped by them savages at the wood camp, I woke up an' reached for my britches. Right then somebody pounced on me an' next time I wake up I'm chained to this stanchion. How about you?"

"Same story, Ed. Only they weren't savages."

The old-timer snorted. "You ain't tellin' me nothin', son. This is Hawley Hatfield's doin's. His engineer run us aground an' some of his hirelings attack us, giving him an excuse to pull out without them guns an' ammunition. Yep, it's my guess he'll line his pockets well with this night's work."

"Reasonable," murmured Yancey. "And it explains Hatfield letting rival packets pass us. Also his blackballing you for talking to me. But why are we in irons, instead of dead in the river?"

"Same reason a cat plays with a mouse. He wants to gloat over breakin' me. He'll charge me with running the *Mona Paisley* aground and plotting with the Indians to grab them guns." He sighed. "Looks ironclad, too."

"And my reputation won't help you any," said Yancey. "You shouldn't have fooled with me."

"What's the difference?" the pilot said impatiently. "Hatfield's a sly devil. If it hadn't turned out this-away, he'd have found some other Hell, fifty years on these rivers, an' now broke like this. I still can't believe Hatfield'll go through with it."

"Why not?"

"Because he knows that five minutes after I talk with Hi Paisley, he'll be out in the cold. I'll lay a lot that Hatfield's the gent behind the trouble that's about ruined Hi. That's why it won't surprise me none if—" He paused, breathing hard.

"If what, Ed?"

"If he never lets me reach Fort Benton. Damn it, if I could only shed these irons I'd make him hard to catch. He better be damn sure he's got me before he gives up the idea of murder."

It was an ugly thought that haunted Yancey from that moment. Every rap of feet on the deck filled him with apprehension. And it must have been worse for Ed Vermilion. Time wore away, and there was no way of telling if it was day or night. Heat from the boilers tortured them, parched their throats.

Then suddenly daylight was blinding them. Four men stepped through the glare made by the open door and loosed the heavy chains. Roughly they were hauled erect, marched to the saloon. There Captain Hatfield, imposing in his brass buttons, made them suffer the humiliation of standing before passengers and crew.

Yancey caught *Mona Paisley's* glance and read sympathy there. Then she turned her eyes away and

Yancey watched Hatfield, whose eyes were on the pilot.

"Well, Ed, birds of a feather! I've watched you taking up with this scoundrel, Valliant. That's how I was able to save this packet and the lives of the passengers. I only regret that you cost me part of our cargo. Too bad I haven't the authority to deal with you as you should be handled—with a noose. But I'll do the next best thing. I'll keep you both in irons until we reach Fort Benton and the law. You've piloted your last boat, Vermilion. And you, Valliant, will be held to answer for complicity in Vermilion's crime. That's all. Take them away, men!"

NO jail dungeon was ever worse than the dark hole that held Yancey and the little pilot. It was eternally dark. Sweat bathed them and save for food fetched them by a deck hand once a day they were left entirely alone. There was some comfort in their companionship, but the hopelessness of their plight weighed heavily on them, and their talks were labored, deeply colored by despair.

After a while they lost track of time. Day and night the packet engines beat a steady rhythm. Occasionally the engines stopped and the deckhands loaded fuel. At such times the little pilot would mutter: "Must be Meemaha wood camp," or "This will be Fort Buford, or mebbeso the Larb Crick camp."

One night Mona Paisley let herself into their prison. Ed sat up, gasping.

"Mona, you shouldn't 'a' come here. If Hatfield found out, he'd sure—"

"He's busy," she whispered. "I've brought you something." She lowered a burden, closed the door and

lit a tallow tip, her lips trembling as she took stock of their whiskery gauntless. "Tomorrow we reach Fort Benton," she said. "I thought you'd want to shave and eat a square meal before the ordeal."

She produced a small mirror, razor, soap, and towels, together with more food than they'd seen in two days. Yancey looked at her gratefully.

"You're an angel of mercy, Miss Mona."

"I've done nothing," portested the girl. "I'll begin to really work for you tomorrow." Despair seemed to touch her. "My only fear is that Hatfield may raise such a stir that dad's hands will be tied. Anyway, he'll do what he can." She turned to Yancey. "Dad once told me of the young gambler he fought beside in Natchez. He's not one to forget."

Then she had stepped outside again, bolting the door after her. And behind her she left renewed hope for the two weary prisoners.

Yancey and Ed Vermilion sensed it when the packet warped to the bank at Fort Benton. Stoking ceased and the engines grew still. Steam hissed through the safety valve and the roar of the busy water front came through to them.

Hours passed, but no one came for them. Silence fell over the water front and they knew it was night. Tensely they waited. At last Mona came to them, distraught and close to tears.

"Father is sick," she told them. "Pneumonia. Captain Hatfield's story hasn't helped him any, either. He—"

"You mean," Yancey broke in, "he believes Hatfield's lies?"

"He believes my brother," Mona explained. "Dahl has verified Hatfield's story. And, what can Dad do,

sick as he is? I've come to release you both."

She produced a key and unlocked their manacles. "I got this from Hatfield's cabin."

"You're bound to be blamed," Yancey pointed out. "Maybe you better leave us locked up."

"Yancey," Mona said. "I'm releasing you because I can see no hope of you establishing your innocence. Maybe I'm wrong, but I'm giving you your chance to lose yourself in the wilderness. The West is wide. Join a wagon train, make a new start and give up gambling. That way there is hope for you."

Yancey caught her hand. "Thank you, ma'am, for your kindness and advice. But it's advice I must reject. I never learned much about running and it looks like a poor time to start learning. Ed Vermilion stands to lose a fifty-year berth as pilot because of me. Your father is being robbed, ma'am, and, after what he once did for me, I'd be a pretty poor sort not to help out. No, I'll stick with old Ed."

"But what can you do?" she demanded almost bitterly. "A discredited gambler. If Ed hadn't stood up for you, he wouldn't be in trouble now. Can't you see you're just making it harder for us?"

Yancey stiffened, his lips tightening as he struggled to hide his hurt. Watching him, Mona softened instantly.

"Yancey, forgive me," she begged. "I don't mean that. But I . . . I'm beside myself with worry. Forgive me."

She put her hand on his arm and Yancey took it, clinging to it. "Mona," he said earnestly, "I may be a discredited gambler, but I've done nothing I'm ashamed of. Some day you'll know the whole

truth. Trust me and believe that Ed isn't the only one I want to help."

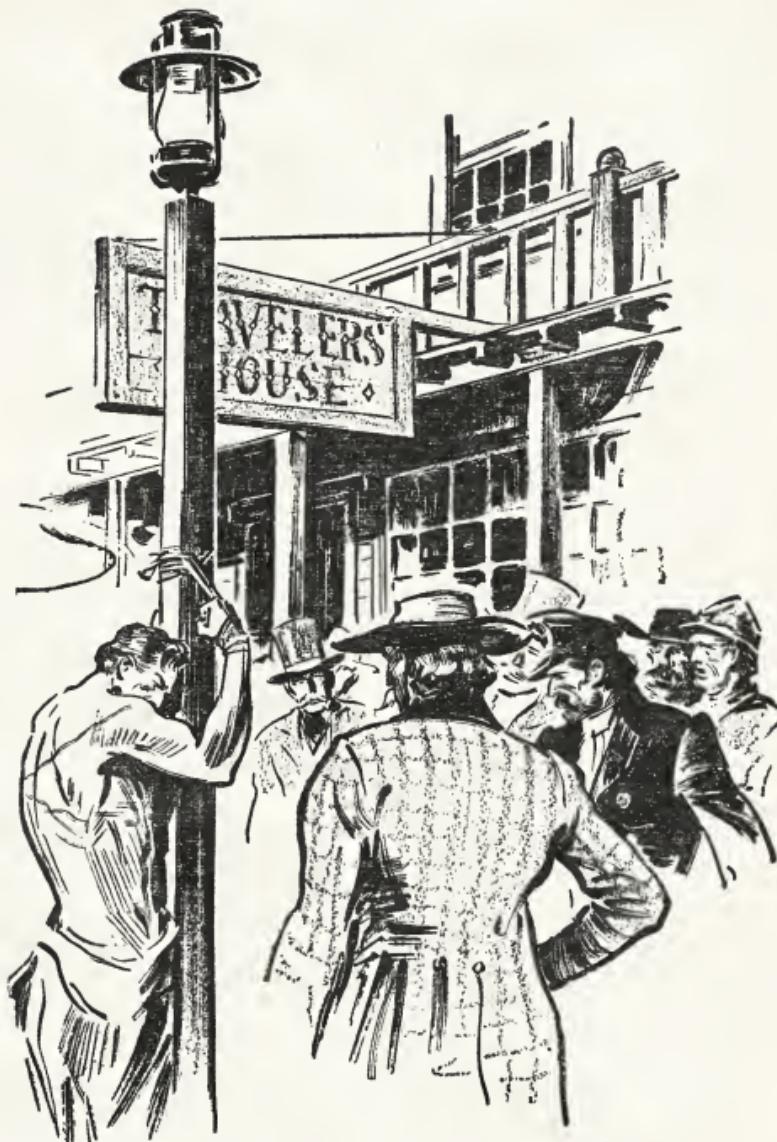
She seemed to ponder his words, making no effort to remove her hand. "I'm glad you said that, Yancey. I know you'll not fail me."

SHIE leaned forward, and her lips met his in a sudden, breath-taking kiss. Then she was gone, leaving Yancey trembling, hardly conscious of the fact that Ed Vermilion had already slipped from the cabin.

After a while, Yancey went out on deck. The packet seemed deserted, the town beyond the bank wrapped in sleep. Only a few lights shone amid the dark shadows beneath the weathered roofs. Somewhere prairie wolves yapped at the low, red moon.



Yancey drank it in, trying to quiet his mind. There was a step behind him and Ed Vermilion came from somewhere with guns and car-



All of St. Louis—gamblers, soldiers, river men, freighters, cowmen—helped drag Yancey to a lamp post where a freighter laid on the whip!

tridge belts. He handed one to Yancey, buckled the other about his spare middle, drawing a deep breath.

"Man, it's good to breathe free air again. Here, have a drink of Hawley Hatfield's own rum."

He passed the bottle and Yancey drank, conscious of a warming thrill that this stanch old-timer was with him, friendly, trusting. In his turn, the pilot lifted the bottle to his mouth and took a deep draft.

"Come on!" he said, throwing the unfinished bottle into the river. "We've work to do." He led the way down the gangplank and Yancey followed with a comfortable sense of power at his hip.

Ed Vermilion steered a course down dark byways, with the confidence of a man who knows his way. He paused at last to stare across a narrow street at a house with a single window showing light.

"Hi Paisley's house," he explained. "Maybe you'd better stay here while I go in an' try to talk some sense into his hard head."

"No," Yancey said. "I'll go with you. I want to nail down as gospel what you tell him."

"Come on then," said the pilot, and together they crossed the street.

Old Ed's knock brought Mona to the door, a finger at her lips. Sight of them seemed to stun her. She paled and gasped. "Whatever made you two come here openly like this? Don't you know Hatfield's men are watch—"

Her eyes widened and she fell silent. The pair at the door whirled to Captain Hatfield's booming voice.

"Hands up, you renegades! Escaped, eh?" Moonlight glinted off leveled pistols as the captain, several of his crew, and an army officer from the fort came from the

shadows. "The nerve of them, colonel. Breaking out of my brig and coming here to—" His eyes went to the frightened girl. "Your father, Miss Mona, is he all right?"

"Father is ill, gentlemen. Please don't disturb him."

"But these two men?" Hatfield persisted. "They haven't done him harm?"

"Why should they?" Mona asked defiantly. "I let these men out of your brig, captain. They haven't been inside the house."

"You . . . you let them out?" Hatfield stared. "Are you crazy? These men have been trying to ruin your father. I wager they came here to kill him. Colonel, I think we better take this pair in an' see Hiram Paisley."

Someone snatched Yancey's gun. Then they all trooped inside, over Mona's protest. In the sick room, the light of the table lamp showed Hiram Paisley beneath covers, in bed. And death lay there with him. Yancey had seen it before and he knew the meaning of that gray pallor and frozen stillness of chest. Blood from a gaping wound showed at Paisley's throat, dyed the covers crimson.

"Look!" Hatfield's voice sheared through the awed silence.

"Dad!" Mona rushed past them with an agonized cry. "Dad, what have they done?"

"Good God!" the colonel swore. "Captain Paisley dead—murdered!"

"And by these two renegades!" Hatfield whirled and leveled an accusing finger at Yancey and Ed. "Arrest them, colonel, for this brutal killing."

Bleak-faced, the army man turned to the accused men. But Mona turned before he could issue an order.

"No!" she cried. "What are you

saying, Captain Hatfield? They couldn't have done it. I was with dad when I heard their knock. My father was murdered while you were causing a commotion at the front door!"

All eyes went to the packet captain. Hatfield went white. "Mona!" he gasped. "You're not trying to say that I—"

"I'm not trying to say anything," she said coldly, "except that you're just as wrong about this murder as you were in charging Ed and Yancey with wrecking the *Mona Paisley*. I can prove that, too, and I will."

Red-faced, the colonel turned on the worried captain. "It appears you've talked out of turn, sir," he said sternly. "I agree with the young lady and I warn you, Captain Hatfield, I'll not let you exploit army law to satisfy some personal grudge. Now, sir, we will leave this house and you will help me attend to a few details for Miss Paisley."

REPRESSING his feelings with ill grace, Hatfield shrugged and left the room, his men following. When they were gone, Yancey and Ed tried to comfort Mona, thanking her for defending them. But she looked at them bitterly.

"I don't want your thanks," she said. "I lied when I said I could prove your innocence in the grounding of the *Mona Paisley*. It's just that—"

"—that Hawley Hatfield's behind this deviltry an' you know it," old Ed finished irately. "That's why he jailed us, why he held us prisoner after tryin' us. He had it planned, the devil, so I'd never get to talk with poor Hi. I'll square that, younker, before I'm done."

"I want you both to leave Fort Benton," Mona said stiffly. "Now that dad is gone, Hatfield may for-

get this unpleasantness and allow Dahl and me to run what's left of our business. As long as you're here, you'll just add fuel to the fire."

"I hate to see you trustin' a man like Hatfield, Miss Mona," broke in Yancey. Mona was silent.

"Well, me an' Yancey will think it over some," said Ed, and took Yancey by the arm. They tipped their hats and left.

Later, fanned by a few drinks in a saloon, Ed's rage mounted steadily. "Nothin' to do but load a gun and plug that river rat!" he raged at Yancey. "Bait him into drawin' an' kill him—"

"Who you gonna kill, you dried-up catfish bait?" A tall, spare man reached out for the pilot and spun him around. Then the two were pummeling one another gleefully.

"Whistle McQueen! You ol' son of a gun."

"Eddie, you spiny little crawdad!"

"Younker," the little pilot turned to Yancey. "Here's the best engineer that ever kicked a packet over a sandbar. Whistle McQueen. Whistle, meet Yancey Valliant."

Yancey shook hands with the cadaverous man, then they went to a back room with a bottle and glasses.

"You heard right," confessed Whistle, answering old Ed's query. "After thirty years answerin' bells, Hi Paisley kicked me off the river. Wouldn't take the truth or no part of it, damn his stubborn soul."

"Paisley's passed on," Yancey told him. "It's bad luck to cuss the dead."

"Dead?" Whistle started.

They told him the story and Whistle looked thoughtful. "Can't cheer over Paisley dyin'," he muttered. "But now an honest man will have a better chance on the river. It's a good thing for him he

didn't live to see Hatfield wipe him out—”

“What?” Ed reared up. “Say that again, feller.”

“Sure,” said Whistle. “The Missouri Packet Co. is out to ruin the Paisleys. They'll do it, too, with Wyatt Brophy ownin' the Missouri Co. an' Hatfield, his half brother, managin' the Paisley lines.”

Ed banged the table top. “I'm damned!” he bellowed. “That's the thing I been tryin' to remember. Brophy an' Hatfield kinsfolk! An' the answer to all Hi Paisley's troubles. Whistle, why didn't you warn Hi?”

“I did,” growled the engineer. “He laughed an' said he was too old to hold a man's kinsfolk agin' him. He went in, eyes open an' got his needin's.”

“You're forgetting a mighty fine girl is suffering through none of her fault,” Yancey reminded him.

“That's true, too!” Whistle brooded. “One word from her an' I'd take the throttle for the Paisleys again, in spite of her fish-eyed brother.”

“He's only a weaklin',” Ed said scornfully. “We can't let him stand in our way of helpin' her. Boys, we gotta put a crimp in Hatfield's game.”

“I got no love for him,” said Whistle. “He's the one that turned me in. But we can't do nothin' tonight. Come on down to my shack an' we'll sleep on it.”

Yancey made no objection. It had been a long time since he or Ed had slept in anything but the filthy hole of the *Mona Paisley*. Not until the old engineer had led them down to his water-front shack and showed him a cot with rag and tatter blankets did he realize how tired he was. He went to sleep instantly.

STRANGELY, next morning, none of them mentioned the thing that lay so close to their hearts. It was as if each waited until all that was mortal of Captain Hiram Paisley was laid safely to rest. The old king of the Big Muddy was buried that afternoon. All of Fort Benton turned out, but the three outcasts watched from afar. When it was over, Ed led the way back to the saloon where they had found Whistle McQueen the night before. There, for an hour, old Ed and Whistle McQueen matched drinks, unduly quiet. Yancey said nothing, understanding that in their hearts these two old-timers were wishing one of their own kind farewell. Finally Ed rose, hurled his glass to the floor.

“Wait for me,” he said laconically. “I'm scoutin' around. When I come back, we'll lay us some plans.”

He went out and for two hours, Yancey pitched a listless game of seven-up with Whistle McQueen. Then the little pilot came storming in, his face wreathed with clouds of trouble.

“I'm a dirty liar,” he announced, “if Mona Paisley ain't gonna marry Hawley Hatfield!”

The news stabbed Yancey, bludgeoned him into a bewildered silence. Whistle laughed cynically.

“Hatfield an' his tricks, eh? Marryin' the Paisley Packet Lines an' takin' Brophy pay to make the Missouri company boss of the river. Smart boy, Hatfield.”

Yancey hardly heard. “What else did you hear, Ed?” he asked tonelessly.

“Plenty,” said the pilot. “By Hi Paisley's will, boats, contracts, an' good will go to Dahl an' Mona—share alike. But Dahl is given the say of things an' Mona has to abide

by his will. First thing he done was to make Hatfield manager."

"That'll finish the Paisleys," Yancey said bitterly.

"Sure." Ed bared snaggy teeth. "Hatfield has arranged to race the Missouri company, winner to get the gover'ment haul, Sa'nt Louie to Benton. The army quartermaster has agreed an' the race is official. Can't you see Hatfield winning that race for Mona?"

Yancey looked puzzled. "If he's got it all sewed up for Brophy, what's his idea of marryin' Mona?"

Whistle snorted. "She wouldn't be so hard to marry, son. An' you know it, to judge by your looks."

"Shut up, you toothless ol' fool!" Ed growled. "It's my guess Hatfield's marryin' Mona for her money."

"Why should we worry, if Mona doesn't?" Yancey asked bitterly. "She's wise to Hatfield; she as good as said so. Why is she throwing herself away on him? I can't understand it."

"No accountin' for tastes," cackled Whistle. "Now we might tie a stone around the groom's neck an' feed him to the catfish—"

Yancey stood up, icy and determined. "It's an idea," he nodded. "But first I've got to know if this marriage is on the level, both ways. If Hatfield is forcein' her hand, my chips are in."

"Take it easy, son," warned Ed Vermilion. "We're all in this—"

"Let him alone," Whistle urged. "Valliant's a gamblin' man, which same ain't satisfied till they've tested their luck. Luck to you, kid. What you holdin' against Hatfield's deuces?"

"Sixes!" answered Yancey. "And bullets! See you later."

He flung from the room, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER IV

FOOL'S CHALLENGE

IN his search for Hawley Hatfield, Yancey visited practically every saloon and gambling hall in Fort Benton, careless of the stares flung his way as he went from place to place. He got track of the man an hour later, in the Packet House, a water-front dive.

"Hatfield?" questioned a bartender. "Sure, he's in yonder room, an' busy. What you want of him?"

"More of my business," Yancey said curtly and strode back through the evil-smelling barroom. He opened a door and stepped into a smoky room.

Hawley Hatfield, a cigar screwed into the corner of his wide mouth, was sitting at a table with three river-boat skippers. All seemed to be talking at once, their argument muting the soft closing of the door. Hatfield's voice rose as he traced a line on a chart with a stubby forefinger.

"I tell you it can't miss. We'll make a race of it until—" Abruptly he cut off, his nerves reacting to Yancey's presence. His eyes shifted to the grim man at the door. He paled and his eyes narrowed as he pondered how long Yancey had been there and how much he had overheard. Then, furiously, he shied his cigar into a corner.

"Well, what does this mean, Valliant?" he demanded angrily. "Must a man be forever hounded by a crooked cheat?"

"Listen!" Yancey's voice cracked out like a whip. "Your friends may fall for that, Hatfield, but not me. It's plain you don't like seeing me on your personal earth. Right?"

"Right!" Hatfield said fiercely.

"What about it?"

"This about it!" Yancey's grin

was daring. "You're a four-flusher and a crook, Hatfield. *I'm callin' your bluff!*"

"Damn you, Valliant, you can't talk to me like that," Hatfield roared.

"Can't?" Yancey's teeth flashed. He slid forward to the table edge, ignoring the three packet captains. Hatfield recoiled, Yancey following, driving his open palm against the man's cheek.

It almost upset Hatfield. By an effort he saved his balance, squared about, cursing. His hand shot to the stubby pistol at his waistband. Yancey parted his coat, snapping his hand to his own sheathed weapon.

"Draw, Hatfield!" he urged. "Give me a fair excuse for ridding the river of your dirty work. I've stood for you abusing me, watched you persecute Ed Vermilion. But when you force yourself on a sorrow-stricken girl, you cross my line. Draw!"

Hatfield's temper was at tenterhooks and it looked like gunplay. The three skippers were shouting protests, darting from the line of fire. Yancey ignored them, certain that they would remain out of a fair duel. His eyes held Hatfield, watching the angry man weigh three alternatives. He must draw now, show the white feather, or formally accept the issue of a duel.

The fever cooled in Hatfield's eyes, to be replaced by animal cunning. Thick-voiced, he mumbled, "Very well, Valliant. I accept your challenge. A fair gamble, odds even. My seconds will wait on you later. Now, good day to you, sir."

Nodding coldly, Yancey quit the room, feeling a satisfaction that faded before he crossed the barroom. Near the door, he paused, panicky. Hatfield had outsmarted him, putting off the issue until his seconds

acted and thus gaining time to work his mischief.

Cold inside, Yancey left the saloon. What should he do? Go to Mona? The thought frightened him. Suppose she told him to mind his own business? He had no argument to offer for his act but his hate for Hatfield.

On his way down the street, Yancey was hailed from the office of the Paisley Packet Co. "Valliant! Come over here a minute." Dahl Paisley motioned from the doorway.

Yancey's first impulse was to ignore the man who had got him into his trouble. But some vague distraction in the youth's face caused Yancey to follow him inside. "Well?" he said shortly.

"Sit down," begged Dahl, indicating a chair. "I've got to talk with you."

"Talk with a discredited gambler you caught cheating at cards?" Yancey asked sardonically. "What is it now?"

Dahl dropped his eyes. "I know you hate me," he muttered. "I wish you could forget—and shake hands."

Yancey was amazed. "What's your game, Dahl?" he asked. "You ruin me and now you're suddenly friendly. You must have some ax to grind. What's on your mind?"

"This," Dahl blurted. "A gambler like you must have won lots of money and laid it away. I need fifteen thousand dollars, and right away. Loan it to me, Valliant, and I'll sign anything, pay any interest. I'll—"

"What money I had was lost when you ruined me in the Traveler's House," Yancey broke in coldly. "If I wanted to, which I don't, I couldn't lend you a dollar."

"I was desperate that night," Dahl declared wildly. "Needing

money, I gambled with money dad trusted to me, money I'm charged with now. I'll have to dig it up. Valliant, what . . . what will I do?"

"Try being a man," Yancey advised cynically. "Who's demanding this money, your sister?"

"No. She'd give me a chance. I can't tell you any more. If I do I'll be—"

"I understand," Yancey interrupted. "If I raise this money, Paisley, how will you secure it?"

"I . . . I don't know." Dahl's face fell. "I haven't anything, but a—"

"Yes, you have. You're head of Paisley Packets, according to your father's will. If I can raise this money, I'll take your note and demand that you fire Hawley Hatfield and let Ed Vermilion and Whistle McQueen race your packet—"

"I can't do that!" Dahl cried. "I can't fire Hatfield. And he wouldn't let me hire men he hates."

"Who bosses Paisley Packets?" demanded Yancey. "You or Hatfield?"

Dahl sank to a chair, running fingers through his hair. "Hatfield," he moaned. "And, until God strikes him dead, he always will."

DISGUSTED, Yancey left him sitting there. What hold did Hatfield have over the boy, anyway? Was he using the same leverage on Mona, forcing her to marry him?

"Till God strikes Hatfield dead," he repeated Dahl's words. "Well, God helpin' me, Hatfield's shadow won't be over Mona much longer."

Fifteen thousand dollars! Where could he raise it quickly? There would be money in Fort Benton, money won and lost in reckless gambles. And he was a gambler. He

hurried back toward the saloon where he had left Ed and Whistle. Daylight was about gone when it happened.

Suddenly his hat was snatched from his head. A bullet smashed against the building front at his right hand, echoes running along the street. Instinctively Yancey drew back into deep shadow. He searched the gloom across the street, looking for the would-be assassin while the doors spewed curious townsmen. Finding no target and not caring to be questioned, Yancey snatched up his hat and vanished between buildings.

When Yancey rejoined the two oldsters they eyed him quizzically. Ed Vermilion spotted the punctured hat at once.

"Some coyote try to pot you, son?" he grunted.

"Yes, and a pretty close try."

"How come?"

Yancey told of his movements since leaving them. When it was done, Whistle knocked out his pipe. "Looks like Hatfield's scart of you, boy. Who else would want to knock you off? Funny he missed though, seein' he's a crack pistol shot. It don't make sense."

Silence fell between them as they pondered it. And into that silence came a rapping at the door. Answering Whistle's: "Come in," two packet captains entered with stiff formality.

"Which one of you acts for Yancey Valliant?" one of them asked.

"I'm your huckleberry," Ed replied. "Say your piece, gents!"

"Captain Hatfield," said the man, "accepts the challenge of Mr. Valliant. It will be pistols at twenty paces—sunrise, tomorrow, at the old batteaux landing. Two seconds behind each man."

"Good!" growled Ed Vermilion.

"A free for all, eh? Three on each side an' no holds barred."

Whistle nodded savage agreement. The two visitors grew nervous. "This isn't our affair—" one of them began.

"I'll remedy that, bucko," chuckled Ed, starting toward them.

Yancey stopped him. "Hold on, Ed. It's me an' Hatfield for it." Then to the two skippers: "Tell Hatfield his terms are accepted. Remind him that twenty paces is street distance. He's pretty close at that distance, but a miss is as good as a mile. I want him to have a fair chance."

"What do you mean?" demanded one of the captains.

Yancey squinted through the hole in his hat. "On second thought, gentlemen, it's a bit too close. My respects to Captain Hatfield."

The two left, and Ed, Whistle, and Yancey went to the street. Hearing his name called, Yancey whirled to face a burly Irish stevedore who held a small envelope in his huge hand.

"From Miss Paisley, sir," the stevedore explained. "And I'd be affer waitin' fer yor answer."

In the beam of lamplight from a window, Yancey tore open themissive and read:

DEAR YANCEY:

It is important that I see you at the Paisley House. If two windows are lighted, wait until company is gone. Please don't fail me.

MONA.

The unexpressed urgency in the summons communicated itself to Yancey. He pocketed the note and answered the queries of his companions.

"It's from Mona," he explained.

"Trouble?" Whistle asked eagerly.

"Trouble or not," declared Ed, "I'm going along. This may be another Hatfield trick."

"Count me in," said Whistle. "I'm cravin' me some—"

"I'll go alone," Yancey interrupted. "It's the way she wants it and the way it's going to be."

He strode away from them, warily hugging the shadows. Across from the Paisley house, he paused to regard its two lighted windows. Mona had a caller.

Impatience consumed him as he waited. A half-hour dragged past. Then the door opened and Hawley Hatfield was outlined against the light. Yancey heard his smooth voice say, "Good night, my dear," then the ring of his boots along the walk. The door closed and one of the windows darkened. Yancey waited for Hatfield's tread to lessen in the distance, then he crossed the street.

As he gained the walk, shadows leaped at him. A hurtling shoulder spun him about, felled him heavily. Rolling, Yancey came up. Someone struck his legs, dumping him. As he fell again, a heavy club came down on him with stunning force. He didn't lose consciousness, yet he couldn't move. He lay on his back, staring up at menacing shadows. He heard Hatfield's voice:

"Slit his throat, Pete. Lettin' that note go through brought the fool into our trap. Finish him!"

A man knelt obediently and Yancey struggled against his numbness. He saw glittering naked steel move toward his throat and heard a dull concussion. Then he felt a heavy weight press him down, and he knew no more.

CHAPTER V

PAT HAND

YANCEY awoke fighting the pair who tried to kill him. He lashed out, caught one by the throat. The man's croak had a familiar ring.

"Hey, grab the crazy hoot owl's other arm! That's it. Now lift him an' let's cast off our lines before them wolves come back."

Yancey came out of it and recognized Ed and Whistle. He ceased to struggle and allowed the two oldsters to whisk him away into the night. Vaguely he knew they half carried him, half dragged him across town and put him to bed. Then he slept.

He awoke with sun pouring in a window, warning him. Whistle McQueen stood over him.

"Comin' alive, eh? Lucky me an' Ed followed you, son. Them devils was goin' to slit your weasand. We smoked 'em gentlelike, got you here to my place an' had the doctor patch you up. Now you just lay quiet for a week or so, an'—"

"A week!" Yancey broke in. "Like hell. I'm gettin' up right now, and goin'—"

He reared up, groaned, and fell back. His head buzzed and every muscle ached.

"They like to tore your head off," said Whistle. "Doc says for you to lay low an' you'll do it if we have to tie you up."

They didn't have to tie him. They took turns waiting on him, and Yancey was glad to await his returning strength. But after a few days he began to worry.

"What about Hatfield?" he asked Ed. "Has the wedding taken place?"

"Not yet, younker," scowled the pilot. "She's been avoiding Hatfield, though he swears he had nothin' to do with beatin' you. He even said that you're playin' possum, scairt to meet him. I answered that by offerin' to meet him with knives, Mexican fashion, in a dark room. Course he refused."

"When I get out of here, he'll meet me," Yancey declared.

Ed shook his head. "Not a

chance, younker. Hawley Hatfield starts the *Mona Paisley* down the river in a few days, headin' for St. Louie and the big race."

A chill came over Yancey as he remembered the race. Then he stiffened. "Hatfield won't race that



boat, Ed, unless he kills me. What day is this?"

"Friday."

"Tell Hatfield I'll meet him at the appointed place tomorrow morning, at sunrise."

"You can't do that, younker," Ed objected. "Doc Snead says—"

"Never mind that," Yancey said impatiently. "Tell him!"

An hour later, Ed stamped back into the house, morose and gloomy.

"What did he say?" demanded Yancey.

Ed blinked. "Didn't see him," he confessed. "But I've fetched somebody to talk to you. Whistle, don't set there like a hungry buzzard. Come out an' give the boy some privacy."

Whistle unlimbered his great length and followed Ed outside. Yancey heard them whispering, and then Mona came in. Her cheeks were hollow, her blue eyes clouded with worry. But she managed a smile.

"How are you, Yancey?"

"All right," he said. "I'm sorry I failed you, Mona. I—"

"It's my fault, Yancey." Her lips trembled. "I should have known my note would be intercepted."

Yancey studied her. "If it's that bad, you shouldn't have come here. Hatfield will have men watching—"

"I came to tell you about him," Mona broke in. "You must not fight him, Yancey."

"Let's not go into that, Mona." Yancey's lids narrowed stubbornly.

"But, Yancey—" She knelt by the bedside and spoke pleadingly. "He's a dangerous man and so prominent you'll only be punished if you succeed in killing him. What will you gain b' it?"

Yancey gripped her fingers. "Nothing for myself, *Mona*. But at least I'll know he can't ruin your chances in the big race, nor your life. That's all I hope to gain."

She drew away, frowning. "You're presuming a whole lot, Yancey. I don't need your help. I insist that you give up this crazy idea."

He shook his head. "It's out of your hands."

She stood up, looking at him defiantly. "Then you . . . you won't be satisfied until you kill my husband?"

"Your husband!" Yancey sat up in bed, staring at her.

"Not yet," Mona admitted. "But I promise you: Five minutes after you challenge him again, I'll let him marry me."

"You'd hide him behind your skirts?" Yancey said bitterly. "Do you love him that much?"

"I hate him!"

Weak as he was, Yancey thrilled to the fire of her answer. And all his admiration and longing for this girl reflected in his voice.

"Mona, listen to me. Don't tie yourself to that man. He'll make

you party to all the ugliness of his greedy nature. You and Dahl have an opportunity, right now to free yourself. Discharge Hatfield and all his men. Don't give him the chance to ruin you. Put Ed Vermilion and Whistle McQueen on the *Mona Paisley*. And others Hatfield's swept off the river. Let me help. Do that, *Mona*, and I'll agree not to fight Hatfield."

The girl's head tipped down. "What you ask is impossible, Yancey. I must marry Hawley Hatfield. Now, good-by."

Then she was gone and Yancey suppressed a groan. In that moment he knew he was working against insuperable odds. But the instincts of the gambler were still in him. He was sitting in a cut-throat game, bucking a pat hand. He had ridden such hands before, always willing to take a loss that he could better recoup in another deal. But here he must employ a new strategy. There would be but the one deal in this game. The cards were dealt and he had opened the pot. The stakes were high, the sky the limit. All the players had called him. It was showdown.

YANCEY spent a miserable afternoon. His mind toyed with a hundred schemes to checkmate Hatfield without hurting *Mona*. Each in its turn was rejected. His fever returned and he talked wildly, causing the two old-timers to worry. But out of his wildness came an idea so mad as to make even Yancey himself gasp.

Mona would do nothing, that was plain. But Dahl was desperate; in need of money. If he were desperate enough, if it were possible to raise fifteen thousand dollars, perhaps Dahl could be baited into staking the *Mona Paisley* against that sum

in the hope of winning what he needed so badly.

It was impossible. Yet the very boldness of it held Yancey. He saw himself as skipper of the fine packet, Ed Vermilion in the wheelhouse, Whistle McQueen at the engines. And other men, abandoned by the powers that ruled the river, fighting the sullen treachery of the Big Muddy. All working together to win, to defeat the treachery of Hawley Hatfield.

"Listen, you two!" he cried out, startling them. "How much money can you raise, in a pinch?"

They stared at him, Whistle shaking his head. "The boy's clean out of his head again, Ed."

But Ed fixed his faded eyes on Yancey and answered seriously. "I've got ten thousand dollars in a St. Looie bank, younker. An' from what Whistle tells me, he's got about as much saved up, if he ain't lyin'. Why? What you want to buy now?"

"Boys," said Yancey, hardly daring to hope that his words might stir them, "I'm wanting to buy the right for any honest man to have a fair chance on this river. I want to buy the right to down Hawley Hatfield with my weapons instead of his. Will you boys trust me with a loan of fifteen thousand to buy those things?"

Ed's lips tightened. "You're dead right, Whistle. I better get Doc." He stood up.

"Wait!" begged Yancey. "I was never clearer headed in my life, boys. Listen—"

Speaking swiftly, disconnectedly, he told them of Mona's stand, of Dahl's desperate need of money. He drew a glowing picture of them hurling a fast packet up the Big Muddy, winning from both the Missouri Co. and the Paisley Lines. Then he con-

fided in them his hope of winning the *Mona Paisley* from Dahl.

"But you might lose," Whistle said doubtfully.

"I can't lose!" cried Yancey. "I've got a winning hunch."

"What if you do win?" said Ed. "Mona owns half of the packet. She'll not see it gambled away."

"A Paisley stands by a Paisley," countered Yancey. "I'm sure it's some trouble of Dahl's that Hatfield's holdin' over her."

"I hate to make war on Mona," Ed murmured hesitantly.

"You won't," promised Yancey. "You'll make war on Hatfield. As for the spoils—well, wait till we win."

"What?" roared Whistle. "You suggestin' we won't win that race, Valliant? Hell, I'll loan you seventy-five hundred dollars an' bet twenty-five hundred we win. You with us, Ed?"

"Who, me?" The little pilot bounced up, bristling. "Try keepin' me out, you ol' fossil. If that money you're braggin' about is real, you're took up before you can renig. But I'll dig up what you ain't got. Gimme two hours an' I'll round up half a dozen packet rats that'll be tickled pink to join up with us an' add their rainy-day mite to win this race. Wait for me." He clapped his shapeless hat on his head and bolted from the room.

"An' he'll do it, too," grinned Whistle McQueen. "I never seen such a fightin' heart in such a runty body. Son, you as good as got that money in your fist."

ED VERMILION was back for supper, enthusing. He had, he told them, interested two men to the extent of a thousand dollars each. There were others he knew who would come in when he could

find them. He waited only long enough to eat, then set out again, this time with Whistle. Yancey fell asleep, more encouraged than he had been in weeks.

He was awakened by subdued talk and the muted tramp of boots. He heard Ed Vermilion order quiet, then a light glimmered on the lamp wick. Through the door came twelve gaunt and bearded men whose hopes and aspirations were written in their seamed faces which were lined with the joys, the tragedies, successes and failures of lives spent bucking turbulent inland waterways. All were beaming, thrilled by the promise of berths taken from them by younger, stronger men.

One by one, Ed Vermilion named them off. Stumpy Peters, with his wooden peg and direct, glittering eyes. Dour Duncan McDonald, a once famous skipper, huge-handed and towering. Stern-wheel Carson, ace of the river in times gone by. And Pierre la Croix, who had swept keel boats down to St. Louis in the golden days of fur. These and other lesser ones adding up to ten, besides Ed and Whistle. Men banned from the river, bound to the land by ties of bitterness. All with good cause to hate Hawley Hatfield, all eager to try their luck in the race.

Old Ed produced a jug, pouring tin cups of raw liquor. He lifted his cup. "Drink luck to Yancey Valliant, boys, an' to the race we'll make if he wins the *Mona Paisley*. Down the hatch!"

They drank and Yancey drank with them. Then they put down their money. Not all had the cash, their savings being banked at distant points, so they made out I O Us assigned to Yancey.

In that moment, Yancey knew a pride that restored him to faith in himself. It made him well enough

to get up, ready to take his proposition to Dahl. Then came a sudden revulsion of feeling as he realized the magnitude of his task.

"Boys, wait!" he cried. "It ain't right. This money stands between you an' starvation in your old age. What if I lose? What if there's some trick, some slip-up?"

They laughed him down with raucaus whooping.

"Show me the yella belly who won't gamble to live again!" challenged Stumpy Peters. "We're free, white, an' twenty-one, an' in our right minds."

"Lie ye doon, lad," said the big Scot, McDonald. "Be ye fair easy in yer mind aboot us. Do ye na' ken that if we lose the money, lad, we're none the worse off. 'Tis na' worse to star-r-rve then to die of dry rot, without a keel under yer feet. I'm wi' ye to the last farthin'."

"*Oui, oui!*" cried La Croix. "*Mon ami*, Pierre pay twice so much as fifteen hundred dollaire to run zis Hatfield off ze riviere!"

So it went, all down the line. When they were finished, Yancey was over his dejection, filled again with the courage that sustains a gambling man.

"All right, boys," he called gaily. "Trust me to win the packet an' I'll trust you to win the race. If I lose, I'll pay you back—if I live long enough. If you lose, Hatfield will rule the river. We've got to win."

Their answering yell was promise enough that they would do their part.

CHAPTER VI MAD GAMBLE

NEXT day, about noon, Yancey left Whistle's house and limped painfully uptown to the office of the Paisley Packet Lines. Following

him, at a distance, came Ed and Whistle, both with pistols ready and a keen eye out for trouble.

Yancey entered the packet office, waved aside a clerk's officious query and entered a door marked "Private." Dahl Paisley sat at a long table, his head in his hands.

"Well," he said nervously, "what do you want?"

Unhurriedly, Yancey took a chair. "Last time I saw you," he said dryly, "you wanted money. Changed your mind?"

Dahl's eyes lighted as he leaped to his feet. "You mean you've—"

"Yes," said Yancey. "I've got fifteen thousand dollars!"

"Thank God!" Dahl murmured. "Let me have it and, in half an hour, I'll buy myself out of hell. It's white of you, Valliant, and I'll see you don't regret it. Do you want a note or—"

"No note," said Yancey. "The money is yours—on the turn of a card."

Dahl started. "You mean a . . . a gamble?"

"A gamble, Paisley. Lucky man wins."

Dahl looked bewildered. "What is this, Valliant? If I could cover your bet, I wouldn't be needing money."

"You've got packets," Yancey reminded him. "My money against the *Mona Paisley*."

"The *Mona Paisley*?" gasped Dahl. "You're crazy! That boat's worth three times fifteen thousand dollars."

"Sorry." Yancey rose as if to leave. "It's your chance, but if you won't give me a run for my money I—"

"Wait!" cried Dahl. "Listen, Valliant. We have five packets. You can have your choice of the *Dakota*, the *Abraham Lincoln*, the *River*

Scout, or the *Prairie Queen*."

"The *Mona Paisley* or nothing," Yancey said coldly. "I have a sentimental interest in that boat. Sorry, Paisley."

"Wait!" Dahl leaped forward, flattening against the door. "You win," he said dejectedly. "I'll gamble."

"At the Missouri House at eight," said Yancey. "You'll challenge me to the gamble. Satisfactory?"

"I'll be there," Dahl said slowly. Yancey found the two old-timers pacing up and down nervously.

"We was about to barge in there," growled Ed. "How'd you come out?"

"At eight tonight," Yancey answered. "At the Missouri House. You boys be on hand. Now let's get home. I'm losin' my legs."

That night, the gaming wing of the Missouri House was thronged with river men—captains, pilots, stevedores, and cattlemen as well. Card games, roulette and dice tables were ringed with eager betters. Aproned waiters scurried back and forth with trays of bottle and glasses. The lights were foggy with tobacco smoke.

Elbowing through the crowd, Yancey was heartened by the sight of Whistle and a half dozen river outcasts who had volunteered for the race. He found Dahl Paisley and Hawley Hatfield at the outer ring of spectators, around the roulette wheel. Hatfield's eyes lifted at sight of him and there was a warning movement of his lips. Dahl looked up, smiled thinly and moved toward Yancey. His voice rose.

"So you're a gamblin' man, eh, Valliant? Yeah, well I'll try you again. We'll cut one card—my *Mona Paisley* against fifteen thousand dollars."

"Done, Paisley."

"Let's step into a private room," said Dahl, leading the way.

Behind them, Hatfield bellowed: "Cards, waiter. A sealed deck!"

"An' they better be straight, mister," said a cracked voice as Ed Vermilion fell into step with the surprised skipper.

Talk fell away as men shifted, radiating toward the open gaming room, where Hatfield poured drinks and offered a toast.

"To the best card, gentlemen."

They drank. The waiter came with cards and Yancey opened them. The moment he broke the seal, he knew they were marked. He rifled them, his mind busy. He was not surprised. It was asking too much to expect Dahl to risk the *Mona Paisley* fairly. It worried Yancey, but failed to shake his confidence. He had been forced to learn all the tricks to protect himself in the clinches.

HAVING verified the suits, Yancey shuffled and spaced the cards. "Draw!" he invited.

Dahl nodded, his lips tight. The hush was so intense that the sound of his uneven breathing was audible. He tongued his fingertips, studied the spread and flipped one over.

Ed groaned and a cheer came from the watchers at the door. Paisley had cut the ace of hearts!

At sight of that lone red pip, Dahl loosed a triumphant cry. Hawley Hatfield slapped him between the shoulder blades.

"You've done it, boy!" he roared. "The Paisley luck holds!"

Silence settled again and all eyes fixed on Yancey. He smiled faintly. "You draw well, Paisley," he murmured. "Almost too well."

Dahl paled, watching with fascinated eyes as Yancey flipped over a

card carelessly, mockingly. It was the ace of clubs.

Ed Vermilion loosed a rebel yell. "You done 'er, son. Matched his draw! Next time you'll take him!"

"Shut up, you chattering old fool!" growled Hatfield. "Dahl, draw another card."

"It's customary," Yancey said politely, "to change the order of drawing. I claim the first cut."

"What's the difference?" demanded Hatfield. "Draw and don't talk so much."

"Thanks," Yancey said. "Captain, may I borrow your coat?"

"No!" thundered Hatfield. "What tomfoolery is this?"

"Ed." Yancey turned to Vermilion. "Give me yours."

Grinning, the little pilot shed his coat. Yancey spread it over the cards. "Now, gentlemen, I will draw and Paisley will draw. The lucky man wins."

"Well I'm damned!" blustered Hatfield. "Can you beat his gall?"

Dahl Paisley drew himself up stiffly. "A cheap trick," he said indignantly, "to insinuate I'm cheating."

"If you're not," said Yancey, "you'll not object to drawing blind." His hand went under the coat, came out with the jack of diamonds.

Dahl Paisley went to pieces. "A tinhorn's trick!" he bawled. "I won't draw! I'm risking a forty-thousand-dollar boat against your fifteen thousand dollars." His eyes narrowed. "Sa-a-ay, how do I know you've got that money?"

"Same way I know you've got the *Mona Paisley*," murmured Yancey, and drew out gold and greenbacks. Dahl's eyes glittered greedily and his hand went toward the coat. Then he was stubborn again, sulking.

"No! You don't trust me, so we'll call it off."

The watchers jeered. Dahl bit his lips. And Yancey, watching Hawley Hatfield, saw the man's scowl replaced by crafty eagerness.

"Come, Dahl," the captain urged. "Don't be a welsher. If you quit now, not a man on the river will ever trust or respect you again. Buck up; draw a card. You've fifteen chances out of fifty-one to do no worse than tie."

A badly shaken youth nodded glumly and drew a card—the six of spades!

Yancey had won the *Mona Paisley*!

CHAPTER VII

WAR CRY OF ABANDONED MEN

ED VERMILION filled the room with wild Indian yells. Through the roaring crowd came Whistle McQueen and the oldtimers who had staked this gamble. Yancey handed Ed his coat, stuffed the money into his pockets and eyed the stricken youth across the table.

"Paisley, I'm sorry for you," he said. "Some day you'll thank me for what happened tonight. I want the transfer for the *Mona Paisley* now."

"I . . . I won't sign it!" blazed Dahl.

"Then I'll take over without papers. I have enough witnesses, men who heard you agree to the gamble."

"All right." Dahl shook himself together. "We'll go to the house, Valliant. My sister must sign, too. This will kill her."

"And you," Ed Vermilion snapped at Hawley Hatfield, "keep out of this. Yancey's got some fightin' men behind him this time."

Hatfield silently watched Yancey and Dahl leave the card room, with Whistle and Ed Vermilion right behind them. Bringing up the rear

were Stern-wheel Carson, Pierre la Croix, and two others.

Mona rose as Dahl and Yancey came into the Paisley living room. Puzzled, she looked from one to the other.

"What's the matter, Dahl?" she asked anxiously. "Is something wrong?"

"This gambler got me into a game, sis." Dahl's voice was hysterical. "He cleaned me. I . . . lost the *Mona Paisley*!"

Mona recoiled. "Dahl! You couldn't have done that. You're joking."

"It's true, Mona," said Yancey. "I want you both to sign the release."

Her scorn showed in her glance when she turned to him. Desperately, she tried to control her voice.

"So you played on Dahl's weakness, Mr. Valliant. Waiting has paid you well, brought you a nice revenge for my brother's part in that St. Louis affair. You've ruined him—and me, taking our crack boat and assuring us defeat in the race. To think that my father befriended you and—" Her chin came up. "But we'll not whine. Dahl, fetch paper and quill."

White and shaken, she wrote out the transfer, handed it to Yancey. "There," she said icily. "Much good may it do you. And now, I'm tired of looking at you. Please go!"

"Hold on!" protested Yancey. "This is made out to me."

"Who else?" she demanded.

Yancey was tempted to tell her the whole truth; about that cheating at the Missouri House, about his hope to save her from Hatfield. But, before he did, he wanted to be worthy of her.

"Cross out my name," he said stiffly, "and write 'Company of the Damned.' "



*It was in the wheel-house of the War-
rior that Yancey and
Hatfield came to a
final showdown!*

"Company of the Damned?" She stared. "What is that?"

"Men due to be born again—to-night," he answered. "Men whose names don't matter. Missouri River drift. Good men whose work will speak for them. Hurry, Mona."

She was puzzled, but she signed. Yancey bowed and left the house, his heart heavy.

They met him outside, the old-timers, and in a body they hurried to the water front. Silent packets

upreared against the stars, only the *Mona Paisley* giving out sparks, like fireflies, from her twin stacks. The men went aboard by the gangplank.

Duncan McDonald met them, a giant in the gloom. "Welcome, men," he said proudly. "We had a braw fight wi' the three who held down this ship an' threw the cross-grained rats into the river. They swum ashore an' slunk awa'. But they'll be back, don't ye forget it. Har-r-rk!"



They listened and heard it. The sullen beat of heavy boots, coming nearer.

"*Sacre bleu!*" breathed La Croix. "Dem *maudits* come for more fight, eh? *Bien!* I geevel!" He darted back, returning at once with a stick of cordwood gripped in his huge palm. Duncan McDonald strode to the door of the engine room, spoke gruffly and led four bent stokers to the deck, each armed with a club.

They ranged along the rail, waiting with grim patience while Stern-wheel Carson and Ed Vermilion obeyed Yancey's crisp injunction to draw in the plank.

THE gangplank slid in and the pound of boots was louder. A blot of men, dark against the black curtain of night, took shape along the front.

"Remember the boss' orders, boys," cried a harsh voice. "Clean them snakes off the *Mona Paisley*, an' if they show fight, get down an' wreck the engines. All right, fly at 'em!"

The blot seemed to dissolve, spread out. There was a rush of attackers, the rasp of expelled breath, and they hurled themselves into the river on either side of the prow. Stumpy Peters unstrapped his wooden leg, swung it savagely against a head rearing over the deck line. The head vanished. With a surge, the attackers swarmed over the fender wale. And every man of the rag-tag crew was battling. Yancey, clinging to the rail, drove a boot into a contorted face, smashing it back into the water. Whistle swung a huge wrench, almost decapitating one of the boarders. But the attackers, outnumbering this Company of the Damned two to one, put a dozen men on the packet despite the sturdy efforts of the club-swinging oldsters.

A man hurled himself at Ed Vermilion and the little pilot's yell was wild and joyous as he met the charge head-on with swinging fists. Flesh crashing against flesh, both men went down, rolling along the deck, pummeling one another savagely. Pierre la Croix lifted an assailant bodily, juggled him in his arms, and hurled him far out into the streamway where he hit with a splash.

Curses, howls, and the wicked impact of clubs crashed against flesh-and-bone targets.

In a solid fighting line, the derelicts who had cast their lot with Yancey stood shoulder to shoulder against the Hatfield hirelings, driving them back, inch by inch, until only the rail and the river lay behind them. Yancey, wearied and spent from his efforts to prevent the taking over of the *Mona Paisley*, clung weakly to the rail, urging the old river men on with encouraging words.

One of the hard-pressed Hatfield men flashed a gun, the muzzle flame dancing in the gloom. Duncan McDonald swore savagely, clubbed the man. And then, leading the others, he swept the surviving invaders off the packet.

Not until then was there a break in the ranks of the derelicts. Ed Vermilion whirled from the bow, scurrying up the ladder, yelling back, "Whistle, you warthog, leave fightin' to them as can fight an' look to your engines. Best way to finish this argyment is to start paddles turnin'."

Whistle didn't answer or delay. Breathing hard, he vanished in the dull glare of the boiler fires. Bells clanged for reverse. There was a hiss of steam. Paddles commenced to turn. The packet shuddered, strained. Her bow came loose from the mud with a jerk and she shot out into the current. More bells. The *Mona Paisley* swung her nose downstream, gaining momentum as the paddles took up their sloshing rhythm.

Shouts ran along the deck. Answering curses came from dripping warriors and their reinforcements on the bank. Gunfire slashed the night, the bullets thudding omi-

nously into the superstructure. Pistols blazed a wicked reply from the decks, then there was nothing except the *humpa-thumpa, huma-thumpa* of the engines, the song of escaping steam and the increasing hiss of the bow wave.

Sick and trembling with the reaction of it, Yancey braced himself against the rail, watching the lights of Fort Benton and the bobbing lanterns on the dock fall behind. The virus of excitement, pride and satisfaction helped to sustain him in this moment of complete physical let-down. They were St. Louis bound. Old Ed Vermilion, best pilot on the river, was crouched up yonder over his wheel. Whistle McQueen, as good an engineer as could be found, was at the throttle. A grizzled crew, reveling in the taste of victory, sniffed hungrily as the boat gathered way.

Ahead lay trouble, perhaps, but here was a good packet and yonder was the start of the great race. Yancey managed a faint smile. He had first boarded the *Mona Paisley* a virtual prisoner. Now he was captain with a crew looking to him for guidance.

"God helping me," he murmured, "I won't let them down."

CHAPTER VIII FORSAKEN MEN FIGHT BACK

NEWS of the race was old in St. Louis when the *Mona Paisley* tied up at the bank. There was a large crowd waiting to welcome Captain Hawley Hatfield and they were cheering as Yancey Valliant strode down the gangplank, cheers that died abruptly as they recognized him. Fully recovered in health, after more than a month on the river, Yancey wore his white skipper's cap jauntily and his smile

tightened as he sensed their whispering.

There were men in this crowd who had seen him stripped, flogged, and banished from St. Louis as a crooked gambler. It was balm to his spirit to be returning with loyal men at his back, master of the crack packet, the *Mona Paisley*. But deep down inside him was a growing uneasiness. Hatfield was not here, but his influence could already be felt. The *Mona Paisley* would never make the race if Hatfield could prevent it.

But Yancey showed none of his uneasiness as he strode confidently through the gathering, heading at once to the office of the quartermaster general of the army. There he was quickly put at rest regarding the official sanction of his entry in the race.

"The race is wide open," he was told. "All we are interested in is cutting down the time to Fort Benton. There is no entry fee, nothing at all to pay except the bond which must be posted."

"The bond?" Yancey said questioningly.

"Each packet carries a cargo of government supplies. Racing is hazardous. Therefore the government demands a ten-thousand-dollar bond against loss of cargo. We must have dependability as well as speed."

Yancey left with a downcast feeling. There was more than the race to be won. Ten thousand dollars! Once again his company must gamble. He returned to the *Mona Paisley* and told his men of the need for more money. Not one demurred. The fever of the race was in their blood and they would go clear through to the end, win, lose or draw.

The packet was loaded and ready when the other Paisley boat, *Sarah*,

steamed in from Fort Benton. Captain Hawley Hatfield was in charge, and Dahl and Mona were aboard. Watching the packet dock from the wheelhouse, Yancey noticed Hatfield's officious way with the two young people. As if he owned the Paisley Line and they rode only by his sufferance.

But a lot of Hawley Hatfield's arrogance was gone when he returned from the office of the quartermaster. He was furious, red of face, fuming. With him was a wiry, bandy-legged little man whose heavy scowl and troubled eyes clearly reflected his dislike of the job facing him. The badge on his breast glistened brightly as he planted himself at the gangplank of the *Mona Paisley* and he kept a nervous hand on the butt of the pistol at his hip.

"Well, go ahead and arrest him!" Hatfield said irritably. "I expect you to do your full duty, marshal."

He stalked away toward his boat and the little marshal squinted along the *Mona's* deck. "Which one is Valliant?" he demanded.

Yancey stepped toward him. "I'm Valliant. What is it?"

The marshal looked uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, but I've got to arrest you. It's not my doin's, you understand."

"Arrest? What charge?" Yancey asked without surprise.

"Robbing's the charge. Cap Hatfield swore out the warrant."

"How bad do you want me, marshal?" asked Yancey, and the question started a little laugh among the packet's company.

"I . . . I hope I won't have to use force," the lawman stammered.

"Count us!" Ed Vermilion called down, "an' then fetch twice as many badge-toters."

"You'll need plenty of force," affirmed Yancey. "I won't let you ar-

rest me today or any day before the race. When I come back, if ever, I may let you take me. Maybe not. What do you want to do?"

The marshal twisted uncomfortably, glanced nervously toward the *Sarah*. With no assurance forthcoming from that direction, he plainly had no intention of forcing the issue. "I got to look into this," he muttered. "But I'll be back!" With that promise, he turned on his heel and hurried uptown, speeded by the laughter of the *Mona's* crew.

He didn't come back, but Yancey, wisely, did not tempt fate by going ashore. That day and the next was spent putting the engines in top condition. The Missouri Packet Co.'s crack boat, *Warrior*, had come to her mooring, to be leaped on by a crew of workmen. They stripped the superstructure of anything that could be spared, lightening the craft and reducing wind resistance. All night long they labored, their noise disturbing Yancey less than their purpose. The race might be won or lost by some such strategy. Yancey took it up with Ed, but the little pilot shook his head.

"Take her down to bare planks an' give her two days; we'll still beat her."

Next day stevedores were busy loading small craft with coal. These boats were to steam upriver to their fuel-relay stations. The powerful Missouri Co. was preparing well for the test.

Yancey and his mates talked over the matter of fuel, arguing about buying coal and hiring fuel boats. There was still some money left and every man was willing to risk it. But Ed turned thumbs down.

"Nothin' doin'," he growled. "If we do, we'll depend on coal an' find it gone when we need it most. Between Hatfield an' the Missouri

Co., we'd be stole blind. No, we'll burn wood an' pick up as we go."

AT last, the day of the race dawned hot and clear. With sunup, St. Louis folks began arriving at the water front. Under the guiding hand of the official starter, the three packets had been turned, sterns to the bank. They made an imposing sight, the *Sarah* and the *Warrior* flag-decked, the *Mona Paisley* between them, sleek and somber, without an inch of bunting on her. Tall stacks were belching smoke as Yancey made a last-minute round to see that all was ready. Whistle and the three old stokers, stripped to the waist, grinned at him from the hot engine room. Ed Vermilion and Stumpy Peters, alternate pilots, chafed in the wheelhouse. Stern-wheel Carson, alternate engineer, and three others stood on the Texas deck watching the crowd milling on the bank.

Yancey had reached the rear deck when he glimpsed *Mona Paisley* moving inside the stretched ropes toward the *Sarah*. She looked very lovely, he thought, in her full skirt, her little hat and colorful parasol shielding her face from the sun. But she seemed strangely indifferent to the excitement and there was little interest in her manner. Her eyes were on the upper deck of the packet that bore her name and Yancey could sense her unhappiness across the interval.

She did not see him until he tipped his hat and spoke.

"You're going to win this race, Miss *Mona*," he called. "I'm betting on it."

She started and looked at him without emotion. "Is that your idea of a joke?" she asked coldly.

"I mean it, *Mona*."

"Your judgment may be as bad

as your conduct," she admitted stiffly. "But the *Sarah* is no such boat as the *Mona*. I lost all hope of winning when you . . . you took our prize packet. To me, the race only puts off the end of the Paisley Packets and my day of . . . of fear."

She turned away, walked stiffly to the gangplank of the *Sarah* and aboard. Yancey knew she referred to her marriage to Hawley Hatfield, and felt a rising fury against the man. He stood there awhile, the noise, the crowd, the flowery speeches by politicians unnoticed as he steeled himself for the test that was coming.

A little blue flag ran up the pole and a great cheer rose from the crowd. Five minutes to starting time. The *Mona's* pop-off valve broke loose and, through the hiss of it, Ed Vermilion's voice shrilled from the wheelhouse.

"Grab that ax, Yance! When the gun barks, hack them stern lines an' watch me put her nozzle into the flow!" And to Whistle, who came out to thumb his nose toward the pilot house: "Git back to that throttle, you slab-sided coot! An' don't bust your eardrums listenin' for bells. The cannon will spell full speed ahead."

A packet from Natchez came nosing to a mooring, her passengers and crew thronging the near rail, staring, cheering, waving. Then silence caught the crowd as the moment neared. "Ready!" the starter called, and raised his arm. The cannoneer poised the torch over the fuse of his piece. And through that hush-filled, suspenseful moment came a woman's cry. Weary-looking and shabbily dressed, she led three young children down the gangplank of the Natchez packet, then hurried along the bank,

waving her hands and calling a name over and over again:

"Hawley Hatfield! Hawley Hatfield! Wait, it's Martha—your wife!"

Boom!

Jarred from the spectacle by the discharge of the starting gun, Yancey swung his ax. The blade bit through the mooring rope and the *Mona Paisley* shuddered as the throttle was thrown wide. Whistles screamed and bells rang. A mighty roar lifted from the massed spectators. Then it happened!

There was a flash, a tremendous detonation and a crashing and splintering of wood. The *Mona Paisley* wavered, slewed about. Concussion shook her and Yancey was thrown violently to the deck. For a moment he lay there half stunned, listening to the cries of the alarmed crowd and the lurid cursing of Ed Vermilion from the wheelhouse.

Whistle McQueen came reeling from the engine room, his face contorted with rage. Like a monkey, Ed came swarming down the ladder.

"The lousy, ship-scampin' son!" yelled the little pilot. "Some more of Hatfield's work. An old trick, dynamite slung in the wheel housing!"

"Yancey, we're licked. It'll take a week to repair that wheel, maybe longer. An' look at them two packets go."

Yancey came to his feet, joining the rush of the packet's company to view the disaster. A glance showed him the two packets speeding against the current, the *Sarah* a length ahead of the *Warrior* and gaining. The surge of the crowd to the water's edge had engulfed the frantic woman who had called herself Hawley Hatfield's wife, but Yancey hadn't forgotten. The information she had brought took part of the sting out of the shocking

sense of defeat. He looked down at the shattered housing, then slammed his fist into his palm.

"Boys, we're not licked!" he cried excitedly. "We've got two days to repair the wheel. We'll reach Fort Benton first if we have to drag the *Mona* overland. Fly at it!"

They had never seen him so caught up by emotion and they caught his spirit. For a moment they stared at him, then they jumped, as if stung by a lash. Some leaped to clear the wreckage. Ed grabbed Whistle McQueen.

"Wake up, you overfed ol' craw-dad! What you gawkin' for? Come on, we're goin' ashore for lumber an' iron an' a shipwright!"

He rushed the engineer over the stern, through waist-deep water to the bank. They elbowed through

search of the woman who had come on the Natchez packet. It wasn't easy, and it took time, but at last he found her in a cheap lodging house on the water front, frantic with worry, and made desperate by her need of money. Patiently he listened to her story.

For fifteen years, she told him, she had been the wife of Hawley Hatfield. Since he had left Natchez for the Missouri River run, she had lived with her mother, waiting for him to keep his promise to send for her and the children. Hearing of his prominence in the race, she had come north to join him. Now he was gone—without her.

"He saw me, too," she sobbed. "Looked right at me as if he never saw me before! Now . . . now we're here without money and I don't know what to do next."

Yancey gave her enough money to see them back to Natchez and walked wearily back to the packet. The repairs were made, the shipwrights gone. Steam was up and the tired crew chafing. There were no cheers, no crowd of people to see them off this time. Those who had bet on the *Mona Paisley* had already paid off. The government men had come down to advise unloading of the cargo and taking down the bond. But Ed Vermilion, with choice profanity, had politely refused. Unreasoning stubbornness was driving these outcasts now toward the only goal that was left for them. They didn't know when they were licked, which by all the signs they were.

The *Warrior* and the *Sarah* were fifty-two hours gone when Yancey saw the skyline of St. Louis vanish behind the rising bluffs. Two days and four hours behind! It looked like a hopeless handicap. At the throttle, Whistle rubbed tobacco in



the crowd and vanished. The Company of the Damned was fighting back!

CHAPTER IX

LAW OF VENGEANCE

FOR two days the crew of the *Mona Paisley* had worked like madmen. At last the end was in sight. Weary, red-eyed from sleeplessness, Yancey took a chance with the law, quit the packet and went in

his eyes to keep awake. Old Ed, grinning fiendishly, held the craft to the deeper channel. Men reeled with exhaustion as they stoked the fires. Still others slept like the dead in their bunks.

But the *Mona's* paddles were eating up the miles and that brought a kind of peace to Yancey Valliant. Ahead lay a tricky, heartless river that was no respecter of plans, persons, or packets. Ahead lay wood camps where it took money on the line for fuel, and practically all the money had gone for repairs. But they were a fighting outfit, ready to battle to the death to reach their goal.

Yancey slept for a few hours, then took his turn at the stoking. The engines remained wide open, and would remain that way day and night to the bitter end. The crew all middle-aged and elderly men, worked till they dropped, depending on their mates to drag them into bunks. They ate when they could and slept the same way. It was a suicide pace.

On and on, driving—driving. Regular-run packets of the Paisley and Missouri lines passed them, coming down, the crew and passengers lining the rails to taunt or shout encouragement. Sometimes the sun blazed hotly down, making an inferno of the engine room. Again savage storms flayed the river. The streamway rose and fell, and still the bow of the *Mona Paisley* breasted the current as the outcasts fought their hearts out.

The strain told on the crew. They grew gaunt, snappish, but never once did a man spare himself. Save for fuel stops, the *Mona* never faltered. Full speed ahead by day and by night.

Luck had been theirs, as if fate would make up for their bad start.

Eagle-eyed Ed Vermilion remained at the wheel until Yancey marveled at his tenacity. And no one on the river was more expert than Ed at spotting obstructions and taking a packet past them.

The feeling grew that they were gaining on the leaders, that they must be closing fast on the *Sarah*, and creeping up on the faster *Warrior*. Confirmation of this hope came from a wood camp near the mouth of the Platte. The *Warrior*, they were told, was a full sixteen hours ahead of the *Sarah*, which had passed the camp hardly eight hours before the *Mona*. It cheered the derelicts, renewed their hopes. For, with the race half made, they had picked up two thirds of the handicap with which they had started out.

They steamed past the mouth of the Niobrara, Ed Vermilion swinging to the east bank to avoid treacherous sandbars.

"Keep your eyes skinned, younker," he called to Yancey. "We're due to pick up the smoke of the *Sarah* any time now."

YANCEY nodded, weighing the matter of fuel. Just ahead was a big wood camp, on the west shore. He hated to stop, for there was still fuel on board. But would it take them to the next supply? Whistle, playing safe, was for stopping and loading. Ed, wild eagerness to overhaul the *Sarah* eating at him, voted to keep on. But Yancey stood with Whistle, so they nosed to a landing in the deepening dusk, where lights burned in a sheltered wood camp.

Duncan McDonald ran the gang-plank out and the crew scuttled ashore to fill their arms with cordwood from the picks. Rough, bearded woodsmen came from the camp to supervise the loading, tally the cords and collect the price. Yan-

cey fired a flood of questions at their leader.

"What about the *Warrior* and the *Sarah*? When did they pass? How far are they ahead?"

The man looked puzzled. "The *Warrior* went past about daylight this mornin'. Her engines were limpin'. We ain't seen nothin' of the *Sarah*. You're a nice second an', the way you sounded comin' in, you should overtake the *Warrior*."

"What?" Astonishment gripped Yancey. "We haven't passed the *Sarah*. Could she have passed without you noticing?"

"Not a chance, neighbor. It's our business to watch an' listen, careful. You must have passed her tied up."

The men stopped their loading to speculate and argue. "Somebody's crazy an' it ain't me," Ed Vermilion declared vehemently. "We ain't passed neither of them packets. What you make of it, Whistle?"

The old engineer spat out his quid. "Last we heard," he said thoughtfully, "was that the *Sarah* was sixteen hours behind *Warrior*. Now we are. Looks like Hatfield's packet took wing for Fort Benton or sunk. Unless, of course, you went to sleep an' passed her without knowin' it."

"If I was asleep," the pilot retorted tartly, "I'd come nearer to seein' it than you would wide awake, you ossified old fossil."

Silence fell heavily as the mystery of it preyed upon them. Where was Hatfield and what was he up to? Yancey broke it up by ordering them to get on with the loading. They were finishing the job when Pierre la Croix cried out.

"*Sacre bleu, m'sieu!* Look!"

Eyes followed his pointing finger and fastened on a red glow hanging over the trees. The leader of the wood choppers swore.

"Injuns firin' the prairie again!"

Looks like it's got into the timber. Between them fires an' the packets beginnin' to use coal, looks like us woodmen will be lookin' for some other kind o' work soon."

Yancey hardly heard as he studied that glow. It was too restricted for a timber or grass fire. He thought of the *Sarah*, recalling tales of terrible river disasters during the war. Could the packet have blown up and left no trace? He thought of *Mona*, fighting back fear for her, when a dark, shambling figure materialized in the shadowed timber. A creature that swayed as it slowly advanced, swinging and drooping its head grotesquely.

"A bear!" breathed La Croix. "Shoot heem—"

"I've got a rifle in my cabin," said the woodman. "I'll get it."

"Wait!" Yancey studied the swaying form. "That's not a bear!"

He broke into a run. Nearing the shadowy figure, he heard its pitiful whimpering cry, saw it collapse. It was a man, beaten, bloody, breathing heavily. Someone fetched a torch, and the crew of the *Mona Paisley* gathered around.

"It's Dahl!" grunted Ed Vermilion. "Dahl Paisley! What the hell?"

"Give me a hand with him!" commanded Yancey. "The rest of you finish that loading."

With the pilot's help he carried the almost unconscious youth aboard the packet and placed him in a bunk. Dahl was terribly beaten and badly scratched by the underbrush through which he had fought his way. Cool water on his hurts and a stiff slug of whiskey brought him around a little. From beneath swollen and lacerated brows he cast a bewildered look around. He spotted Yancey.

"Valliant!" he said weakly. "*Mona*

. . . help her! Hatfield . . . he ran the *Sarah* up the Niobrara . . . burned her. Sold the guns to the Indians. When . . . when I balked, he beat me, left me for dead. He took Mona somewhere, I . . . I don't know—"

His ebbing strength failed him and he lapsed into unconsciousness again. Yancey fought panic as he tried to work out some solution to this newest disaster. At last, icy-faced, he went to the *Mona's* gun case, withdrew a rifle and belted on a loop of cartridges. Then he spoke to the staring pilot.

"Take command, Ed! Look after Dahl and *win the race!*"

"What you mean to do, Yance?" Ed asked anxiously.

"I'm going to Mona, Ed. And, God willing, I'll settle my score with Hatfield. While I'm gone, you take the packet into Benton—first."

"You're crazy!" Ed bristled with indignation. "Right now, there's only one race—to trap that devil's son of a Hatfield. You're gonna have plenty help there, my bucko!"

That the others felt the same way about it was evidenced by the speed with which they armed themselves from the gun case. Yancey, outnumbered, thrilled to the fighting spirit of these reclaimed derelicts and gave in. It meant losing the race, he knew. But what was the race to a girl whose life might now be in deadly danger? With help, he might right many wrongs this night.

Only Stumpy Peters took no part in the preparations. Yancey, reading the one-legged man's hopelessness, slapped him on the back.

"You can't make the hike, Stumpy, but you can hold the packet. That, along with carin' for Dahl Paisley may keep you busier than you think. If anybody jumps

you, shoot to kill. We'll be back as fast as possible."

He led his crew ashore and made a beeline through the trees toward that dull-red glow in the sky. If it was the *Sarah* burning, a human devil must be making tracks that a careful man might follow. Danger would lurk along that trail, death perhaps for more than one of this eager Company of the Damned. But, with Mona in the hands of killing renegades, the danger must not even be weighed.

CHAPTER X

DISASTER BEND

THE charred, smoldering *Sarah* lay with her bow driven into a sandy bank, a total ruin. Yancey Valliant led his tired followers away from the wreck, following a trail marked by boots and moccasins, by hoofs and the grooves of travois runners. It was so plain that Yancey decided not to waste valuable time waiting for daylight. With one pitch-knot torch, he could follow as fast as his old-timers could walk.

Sided by the leader of the wood cutters, he held a steady pace, exchanging an occasional word with the man and now and then cautioning quarrelsome Ed Vermilion and Whistle McQueen to silence. Several hours passed as they put miles between themselves and the Niobrara.

Suddenly the wood chopper, holding the torch, cried out and leaped forward. A man lay in the trail, a halfblood in dirty buckskins. He looked dead, but he proved to be only drunk, on whiskey from the looted *Sarah*.

There was little talk, for they sensed the nearness of their quarry. For another half-hour they crept

forward, the torch out, the way lighted with a rising moon. Then lights shone through the darkness.

From a clump of trees the men looked out upon several fires blazing between rainshackle cabins and tattered teepees. Men squatted about those fires or lay in a whiskey stupor where they had fallen. An occasional weak whoop cut through the chorus of frogs and crickets. Somewhere a fiddle whined and discordant voices rose and fell mournfully.

"Tis a gatherin' of whites, Injuns an' breeds, lads," whispered Duncan McDonald, who had once been a factor for the Northwest Fur Co. "Renegades, all of them, dr-runk wi' devilment and whuskey. There may be ten of 'em to our one, but, mon, we're a match for 'em. Aye!"

"We daren't risk it," Yancey whispered back. "Mona is here somewhere. We'd only endanger her by shooting blind. First, I've got to find where she is. Where I find her, I'll find Hatfield, too. He won't be drunk, so when you hear shootin', come on the run."

Ed Vermilion began to protest, but abruptly gave in. "You always was that kind of a gambler, Yancey," he said helplessly. "More power to your hand. If I was thirty year younger, I'd call your hand an' find that girl myself. Luck to you!"

One by one, they shook Yancey's hand, wishing him luck. Then he was sliding through the shadows, his rifle left behind, his pistol held before him. Following the creek bank, his steps muted by murmuring water, he came abreast of the village without being scented or discovered by the horde of dogs that hung around the place. But the real test still lay ahead.

Silently, Yancey pulled himself

over the bank and, step by step, began his measured advance. Moving toward a lop-roofed shanty, from which came smells of refuse and stale cooking, he was almost close enough to hear snoring from within when he was suddenly set upon by a vicious-fanged hound. Yancey kicked a yelp from the brute, whirled around the corner of the shanty and came face to face with a weaving breed.

Steel fingers sank into Yancey's arm and a whiskey breath assailed his nostrils as the drunken man peered at him.

"Who you?" the breed grunted. "What you do here, huh?"

Now the barking of dogs was rousing the camp. Yancey gave a pull and tore loose. His gun barrel rose, arced against the breed's skull. The man croaked a warning, stumbled and went down as Yancey hit him again. He was out cold.

Meanwhile the village was coming alive with a sullen rumble of alarm. Scores of dogs rushed to the attack. The fiddle wailed to a stop. Singing revelers fell silent. Drunken men reared up, their thick-tongued queries flinging back and forth. A rush of moccasined feet sent Yancey tearing around the cabin.

He scattered charging dogs with a swinging boot and whirled, darting between darkened teepees. Ahead of him, a light winked in a cabin, across an open space already writhing with milling renegades. In the door of that cabin appeared the portly figure of Hawley Hatfield. Then the man had stepped outside, to be lost in the darkness.

Reckless of the danger, Yancey flung himself across that open space thronged with men who were his potential enemies, and in the face of the most dangerous man on the Missouri. But, in Yancey's brain,

the insistent thought hammered: "Mona's in that cabin! Mona's in that cabin!"

Added fuel made a dozen fires blaze higher, the glare revealing Yancey as he made his mad dash. A tall breed hurled himself across Yancey's path, crashing down as the gambler swung his gun. Two others rushed in. Yancey shot one and dodged the other. Hatfield's voice bellowed through the turmoil.

"It's Valliant! Kill him, you drunken fools!"

Muzzle flame punctuated the order and a bullet buzzed past Yancey's ear. Yancey answered the fire without checking his pace and saw Hatfield plunge again into the security of the cabin. Yancey hit the swinging door, shoulder on, and plunged through. A pistol flamed in his face as he plunged into Hatfield, the lead missing as both men went down.

As Hatfield lit, he rolled against a rude table, upsetting it and extinguishing the candle burning in a bottle neck. But Yancey's brief glimpse of the interior was indelibly photographed on his brain. Hatfield sitting on the floor! Mona sitting on the edge of a bunk, her disheveled hair tumbling over her shoulders.

YANCEY hurled himself through pitch blackness, landing on Hawley Hatfield, knees first. Breath was expelled in painful gasps from the renegade captain. He grunted an oath and swung his gun hand. Yancey caught his wrist and drove it to the floor. With his free hand, he groped for Hatfield's throat, gasping an order to the girl.

"Bar the door, Mona! Then come over here and get Hatfield's gun."

He heard her sob of relief, the swift patter of her feet and the sound of the bar dropping into its

notch, while outside pandemonium reigned. Shouts, screams of women, the swift blasting of guns. Though fighting to hold the struggling captain, Yancey could still smile. The Company of the Damned was coming in—shooting. He could hear the shrill fighting yelps of Ed Vermilion and the bur of big Duncan McDonald. Then, Mona was beside him, feeling for Hatfield's gun.

"I've got it, Yancey!" she cried. At her words Hatfield seemed to go crazy. Yancey locked with him and they rolled. Hatfield came up on top, broke loose and raced for the door. Yancey tripped him, heard him crash. The glow of fires began to fill the room. And, for the first time, Yancey could see Hatfield's contorted face. The man struggled to his feet, but Yancey knocked him down. And repeated it again and again, until Hatfield was a moaning, beaten figure at his feet.

"Make a light!" Yancey ordered the girl. "The fight's ending and it'll be safe enough."

Mona struck a match and candle-light illuminated the disordered room. Hatfield, wiping smashed lips and bleeding nose, looked about wildly. He gulped a great breath of air, reeled upward and managed a grotesque grimace.

"Valliant, you're—making a mistake," he panted. "I don't blame you for manhandling me, but the fact is I'm a prisoner of these river pirates. I had to play their dirty game to save Mona's life."

"Yancey, he's lying," the girl cried. "Hatfield, you ran the *Sarah* up the Niobrara and beached her. The pirates took your orders, and when Dahl protested, you killed him so—" Her voice choked. "You—you—"

"She's beside herself—crazy!"

Hatfield said wildly. "She's been through too much, as we all have since—"

He broke off, glancing nervously toward the door. Out of the night came Ed Vermilion's whoop of victory, "That takes care of the lousy rats. Now for Hatfield. If he's so much as drawn blood on Yance, we'll roast him alive. Set fire to them tepees. Burn them shacks to the sills!"

They were coming at a run, and Hatfield went to pieces. "Valliant!" he pleaded. "Keep him off me. He'll kill me without a trial. Don't let him get me, Valliant. I've got a wife and children—"

"I'm glad to hear you admit it before the girl you tried to marry," Yancey said coldly. "No doubt your wife and children would be better off if you were dead, but—" He paused, sensing the blood lust in the voices of the *Mona* derelicts. They, as much as he, had reason to demand this crooked captain's blood. Yet, for all that, Yancey knew it was not right. He strode abruptly to the rear window and drove his fist through the deerhide pane.

"Get out!" he told Hatfield. "You deserve to die, but I can't judge you. But keep off the river. If you come back, you'll die. Now get out!"

"Thanks, Valliant, I won't forget this," Hatfield muttered, and let himself outside. Yancey turned back to Mona, saw horror in her eyes and whirled. Hatfield was leveling a derringer through the window. Yancey, reading murder in the man's eyes, struggled to swing his gun around in time, knowing he was too late.

Screaming, Mona hurled herself toward the window as the gun spat flame. Yancey heard the bullet hit her and caught her dead weight in

his arms. He sent one swift bullet through the window, but Hatfield was gone into the night.

Desperately afraid for Mona and cursing himself for a soft-hearted fool, Yancey carried the girl to the bunk. She was unconscious. He was calling her name over and over again when Vermilion and McQueen broke down the door.

Ed, suddenly silenced, brushed Yancey aside and looked at the girl's wounded shoulder.

"Nothin' at all," he growled after a moment. "Bullet grazed her and she's fainted—and no wonder. Who did it?"

"Hatfield," muttered Yancey. "The dirty killer got away."

"Mebbe he's lucky, mebbe not," gritted the pilot. "His hand is about played out. I've licked his cut-throats, killed half an' scattered the rest—"

"What you mean, you done it, you pint-sized blowhard?" Whistle McQueen demanded acidly. "What you think the rest of us was doin'—playin' hopscotch?"

"Shut up, you lame brain," Ed said severely. "Lend Yance a hand gettin' Mona out o' here. I'm firin' this rat nest to the last louse. Move!"

Moments later they were outside, watching flames wrap the last renegade cabin. The old-timers were whooping it up like boys as they fired fuel stacked about the cases of guns and ammunition stolen from the *Sarah*.

"We best hie us far awa', men," warned Duncan McDonald, "before the bullets start flyin'."

But Yancey didn't heed him. He was kneeling beside Mona, listening to her halting tale.

"—you were right and I was dreadfully wrong," she confessed. "If I have anything left, it was be-

cause of you. But if Hatfield reaches the *Warrior*, he'll surely turn this to his advantage."

"The *Warrior*?" Yancey asked, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"He told me Wyatt Brophy is holding the *Warrior* at Disaster Bend, waiting for him. He was due to start when you arrived. Hatfield must have sold out to the Missouri people."

"Hatfield and Brophy are half brothers," said Yancey, rising. He looked around. "Boys," he cried, "take Mona to the packet, fast as the ponies in yonder corral will carry you. Build a head of steam and head upriver, full throttle. The *Warrior* is waiting at Disaster Bend for Hatfield. God willing, I'll beat him there and settle with him. Whether or not I make it, you pass the *Warrior* with barricades fixed and guns ready. Win that race! Don't argue, Ed. Do as I tell you!"

Already some of the old-timers were running toward the corraled ponies left by the defeated renegades. Before Yancey followed them, he looked at Mona. She was on her feet now, swaying a little, her face white with emotion.

"Yancey," she murmured, putting her arms about him. "Forgive me for being such a fool. And . . . and take care of yourself."

He kissed her, put her in Ed Vermilion's solicitous care, and sped for a mount. The longest odds of a desperate gamble lay ahead at Disaster Bend, where many a good packet had cracked up.

CHAPTER XI

WINNING CARD

ATENDERFOOT in the wilderness, with only the sketchiest idea where Disaster Bend lay with respect to the renegade camp, Yan-

cey had little confidence in his advantage of being mounted. In the moonlight, all the country looked alike—broad prairie broken now and then by windrows of timber.



But he had the North Star fixed and the Missouri lay eastward. It was nearing dawn when he broke out of dense growth and came to the river's edge.

But where was Disaster Bend—upstream or down? Yancey asked himself that question aloud. But if the roiled current failed to enlighten him with its gurgling answer, the sky did not fail him as he cast his eyes northward. Above the black shadows of the encroaching west bank, the low-hanging stars seemed all at once to dance and brighten as they flew upward.

"Sparks!" Yancey shouted in frenzied exultation. "Sparks from the *Warrior's* stacks!" Then he was putting his pony into a run along the sandy flood bank.

He had covered the better part of a mile before he saw the lights of the *Warrior*. Dismounting, he turned his pony loose and started toward the waiting packet. His face was a poker mask as he looked to the loads in his gun. He knew

what his fate would be if they saw and recognized him. And dawn was at hand.

Posted in the brush on the bank, he paused to listen to the voices coming clearly across the water. Hatfield had made it through, and his plaint rose above the voices questioning him.

"It was the whiskey," he was explaining defensively. "How could I keep the stuff from the breeds? Besides, I figured Valliant and Vermilion were still in St. Louis. Well, that fat is in the fire and our goose is cooked if the *Mona* gets by us. We've got to wreck her here an' kill the crew. Every man, you understand. If they get to Benton with the word of what happened tonight, we'll hang—all of us. Now you know what has to be done and I'm depending on you to do it. Wait! There's the signal fire now! The *Mona*'s coming. Back this tub into the current!"

Yancey didn't wait. Stripping off coat and boots, he waded toward the *Warrior*, gun held before his face and only his head showing. A bell rang; steam hissed and paddles churned. Slowly at first, the *Warrior* backed. Yancey caught the gunwale and allowed himself to be towed alongside. He drew himself aboard, bellying down on the boiler deck while he took stock of the odds against him. Amidships, crouched behind boxed hardware, were the members of the crew, each with a rifle glittering in the first pale flush of dawn. From above came Hawley Hatfield's bawled order for more speed as the packet swung and nosed downstream. The throb of the *Mona*'s engines could be plainly heard now.

With all eyes turned toward the far bend, Yancey squirmed along the deck and up the ladder. Gain-

ing the top deck, he crouched, his eyes on the pilot house. Figures moved in there and Yancey stalked them, his gun palmed and his faculties alert for the first cry of alarm. He stuck the gun in his waistband as the pilot cried:

"Yonder she comes, heading full speed into Disaster Bend. Good thing they don't know what's waiting for them."

He laughed and the others joined him. "Brophy and I will go below to lend a hand at the barricade," Hatfield said. "This job must be thorough. Every gun will count. When the shooting starts, hug the floor and let the *Warrior* go with the current. Give us slow speed astern when we close with the *Mona*. And listen for my orders, you understand?"

"Sure, boss. Whatever you want, you'll get."

Hatfield grunted and turned to leave with Brophy at his side. Then both halted abruptly. A tall, dripping figure filled the doorway. It was gloomy under the low deck roof, too dark to make out the features of the intruder.

"What the hell do you want?" demanded Hatfield with surly suspicion.

"I'm the agent of the Paisley Lines." Yancey spoke in a gruff, hoarse tone. "What are you proposing to do?"

"Agent?" questioned Brophy. "Where'd you come from? How'd you get aboard?"

"Out of the river," said Yancey. Seemingly indolent, he lolled against the jamb. "There's a long trail behind me."

Hatfield remained silent, peering. But Brophy played policy. "Mighty strange, mister. But come down to my cabin and we'll talk it over.

Missouri Packets has no fight with you."

"Yes, you have, gentlemen," Yancey said grimly. "And you're making it now. Draw!"

"It's Valiant!" roared Hatfield, reaching for his weapon. Keyed to a high pitch of excitement, Brophy and the pilot were stung to action at the sound of that name.

YANCEY'S hand moved, his tall figure swerving from the portal as three guns blazed in his face. Gunfire seemed to blow him out of the door and onto his back upon the Texas deck.

Hatfield and Brophy piled headlong from the pilot house, roaring triumphantly as their smoking guns swung down. Then Yancey's weapon blazed. Hatfield cried weakly and crashed to the deck. Yancey triggered again and Brophy staggered, dropped his gun and tottered tiptoe to the rail, over which he collapsed, as limp as a dishrag. From the pilot house came the plot's cursing while bells jangled hysterically in the engine room. Then the pilot, too, was shooting.

A bullet stung Yancey's arm as he rolled from the line of fire and came to his feet. The *Mona* was drawing close, too close to waste time. Daring fate, he slashed out the window glass, his gun spraying bullets into the screaming man inside.

Tumult was breaking loose on the boiler deck, a chaos of embattled men darting to vantage points from which they could see what went on above. Yancey took time to reload, then darted into the pilot house. He nudged the body of the pilot from the wheel, rang for full speed ahead. And, surprisingly, got it.

The paddles flayed the stream, the packet gathering swift headway.

WS—4E

Yancey spun the wheel, smiling grimly as wild yells greeted the sudden swerving of the *Warrior*. Now he was heading straight for the bank, the engines pouring full power into the paddles.

Praying that the engineer would hold the throttle wide, Yancey rang again for full speed, groaning as, instead, the engineer answered the clamoring crew and cut steam. They were howling at him, confusing him. And, by the time he could get the gist of their warnings, the *Warrior* struck the bank.

The terrific impact almost shattered the boat. It threw Yancey violently against the wheel and made the packet timbers shriek with strain. From below rose a profane chorus of yells, the hiss of steam, crash of furniture in the saloon, ripping of stanchions and supports and the hollow impact of falling stacks, sheared off at the level of the Texas deck.

Gulping breath into his lungs, Yancey gathered himself and raced from the pilot house. A wild yell came blaring up to him:

"Hell's bells! The fire's kicked out from the boilers! Fire! Fire! Grab your buckets! If we don't get her out, that gov'ment powder'll go higher'n a kite."

Yancey relaxed with momentary satisfaction. He had done what he came to do far more thoroughly than he had dared hope. He could hear the crackle of flames and see the red glow growing. The dazed and bewildered crew, speeding to fight the fire, were leaving the stern unguarded. And there Yancey headed, hurdling the fallen stacks, scrambling down ladders until he stood on the after deck, curtained now with smoke.

The light had suddenly become full and the east rosy with the prom-

ise of the sun. The *Mona Paisley* was bearing down upon the *Warrior*, the crashing of her paddles loud in Yancey's ears as he looked at her. His mind recorded several things in that glance. He caught a flash of Ed Vermilion, calm and competent, at the wheel. And beside Ed the pale oval of Mona's face. He saw smoke and flame pouring from the packet's stacks, her low, curling bow wave, the turbulence at the paddle housing and the long wake stretching behind.

The one discordant note came as Ed wheeled the craft directly toward the stern of the doomed *Warrior*. Yancey had expected to swim out to her, catch the wheel housing and so rejoin his company. Failing that, he would have considered his work well done even though he lost the gamble for his life. He was not afraid to die. Whatever fear he felt was for Mona and his brave comrades. They were coming straight toward destruction. How could he warn them away before fire got to the *Warrior's* powder cargo?

"Steer away!" he shouted, waving Ed toward the far bank. "Don't come near this tub! Powder! She'll blow up, and—"

He gave up, realizing they couldn't hear and that the stubborn little pilot would not be turned from any course he set himself. But Yancey's yell had been heard by the fire-fighting *Warrior* crew. An angry voice blared behind him.

"Look aft, boys! There's Valliant—the crooked tinhorn we had in the *Mona's* brig. He done this. He shot up the pilot house an' drove us ashore. Get him!"

ROARING savagely, quick to turn their fight against something offering a hope of victory, they charged him, shooting as they came.

Lead whined about Yancey, threatening to cut him down. Yet he hesitated to jump overboard until the *Mona* was closer. Playing for time, he leveled his pistol, triggering six spaced shots at the forms avalanching from the smoke rift that hid the shore. One man went down. The rest faltered, diving for cover.

Yancey hurled his empty gun at them contemptuously and turned to dive into the river. The pause had been enough. The prow of the *Mona* was close now and, from above, Ed Vermilion was barking at him.

"Jump, Yancey! Jump, you bucko, like you never jumped before!"

Yancey obeyed, launching himself across that watery void with all the drive of his muscular thighs. Even so he would have missed the deck, save for the swelling bulge of the *Mona's* hull bringing the gunwale closer with each paddle fall. Yancey caught the rail with a desperate reach. His body fell, a dead weight against his arms. He smashed heavily against the hull, the impact almost tearing loose his hold. Then he was clinging there, numb-armed, with the bow wave tugging at him savagely, as if angry at losing him. Strong hands reached for him, pulled him over the rail.

The *Mona* swerved away, heading for the axis of the stream. And, looking back, Yancey saw the rush of men to the *Warrior's* after deck. Their guns were leveling! But not a muzzle flare winked, not a bullet thudded into the racing *Mona*. From the barricaded decks of the *Paisley* packet came a deluge of gunfire. The renegade crew of the *Warrior* realized the hopelessness of it and gave up the fight, scrambling to save themselves as smoke and flame obscured the scene.

The *Mona* was hardly a half mile past when the *Warrior* blew up. The curtain of smoke with its edgings of flame, was suddenly rent. A great geyser of timber and débris shot skyward, hung suspended for an instant, then plummeted into the river as concussion reached the *Mona*. For a flash, Yancey believed the *Mona Paisley* had been blown from the water, so terrific was the impact. Then she settled and went on, the hum of her engines even and rhythmical.

At full speed, the *Paisley* packet raced on. A bend in the Missouri hid from the eyes of the packet's company the débris that had been the proud *Warrior*, flotsam that would line the bank along a thousand miles of the river.

THAT night, with the *Mona Paisley* sweeping majestically toward the goal her company had dreamed of and that not long before had seemed so far away, Yancey and Mona sat on the after deck, watching the banks of the river slip past. A full moon rode the eastern sky, bathing palisade and plain, forest and grass land with an eerie effulgence reflecting the peace in their hearts.

The daylight hours had been spent celebrating the winning of the race, for won it was. There remained only the river to be conquered. And, nowhere on its breast from St. Louis to Fort Benton, were there men better acquainted with her moods and how to meet them than Ed Vermilion, Whistle McQueen, and the grizzled crew, men once banned from the waterway, and now returned to its traffic by the maddest gamble river shipping ever knew.

Mona sat quietly on the deck, her face pensive as she stared into the

shimmying wake. Yancey, beside her, had one arm about her slender shoulders, his face pressed into the fragrant, wavy hair tumbling about her white neck.

"And Dahl?" he said after a long silence.

"He'll be all right, Yancey. It's been a terrible experience and he has learned a lesson, I hope." Then, almost defensively: "Dahl isn't bad, Yancey. He's just weak, easily led."

"I know," Yancey murmured understandingly. "Hatfield victimized many people and had the whole river in his grasp. It seems strange that I, a gambler he chose to blacken, should have drawn the hand to beat him."

She smiled at him. "Gambler's luck, Yancey. It started working for you the night you were flogged and banished from St. Louis."

"What do you mean, Mona?"

"Tell me first," she countered, "what really happened that night in the Travelers' House."

"I had my first and last urge to save a card cheat from himself," he told her ruefully.

"I don't need to ask who, Yancey. I've already heard the truth from Dahl's lips, this afternoon. You deserve to know why he did it, and why he risked and lost the *Mona Paisley* later."

"I've got a good idea, Mona."

"Hatfield got my brother drunk, in St. Louis," she went on, as if she hadn't heard. "When he sobered, he had gold and a diamond ring in his pocket. Some man accused Dahl of robbing him and, through Hatfield's influence, agreed to settle for fifteen thousand dollars, which Hatfield claimed Dahl lost gambling. Dahl signed a note."

"Another of Hatfield's tricks to put your brother under his thumb," Yancey declared.

"We're sure of that now," said Mona. "But Dahl believed Hatfield and became desperate. When he failed to win with company money in the Travelers' House, he became a slave to Hatfield through fear. Later, when he saw through the man's treachery, Dahl turned to you. You won the *Mona*, Yancey, and the debt is still unpaid. The Paisley Lines are wiped out, now that we've lost the *Sarah* and the *Mona*, as well as the government contracts. You and your grizzled crew command the river."

Yancey held her tight. "I command the river, honey," he laughed, "only so long as I command you. Look!"

From his pocket he drew the transfer paper to the *Mona Paisley*. "Do you remember this?"

"Could I ever forget it, Yancey?" Mona asked slowly. "I hated you that night."

Swiftly Yancey folded the paper, tore it through and through and threw the fluttering fragments over the side of the rail.

"The only gamble I ever made," he confessed soberly, "that wasn't for keeps. You needed men to fight, but you were so ill advised you'd have refused them on silver platters. I took the only way I could see to save you. The *Mona* is yours; it always has been. And never again must you give over the reins of the Paisley Packet Lines."

"Yancey!" she cried, then abruptly buried her face on his chest, sobbing. He held her quietly, knowing that only tears could wash away the terrors of the past. After a while she lifted her head, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief and smiling through her tears. "But, Yancey, what about Ed Vermilion, and Whistle McQueen, and the rest. They financed you in this."

"The gamble and the race, yes," he conceded soberly. "A Company of the Damned, Mona, gambling for all that matters in this world—hope and a chance. You won through them, Mona, and you must promise to use their fine, honest, fighting spirit as long as they are fit to trod a deck. Will you?"

"I will," she promised. "And you?"

"Gambling is all I know," he said simply. "Do you think, Mona, the Paisleys can find a place for a gambler in this business?"

"You have made that place, Yancey Valliant," she declared happily. "And the Paisleys will insist that you fill it. Fort Benton will hail you as the winner of the race. As for me—"

Her lips met his in a lingering kiss that made torturous memories fade, while the *Mona Paisley* placidly set a course by the stars that would mean happiness for two lovers who had at last found each other.

THE END.



DON'T CROWD MY GUN



By W. RYERSON JOHNSON

MARSHAL LUKE HILL was taking his ease in a chair tilted against the two-room adobe which served as office and jail. There was another chair. Young Larry Wander could have occupied it. But Larry wasn't doing much sitting these days. He had horse-ranch worries, and his idea of relaxation was to stand and fidget.

"I got a week," Larry declared grimly. "A week, that's all, to scare up the money—or else the Piñon Grove Bank goes into the horse-ranch business and I go on the bum."

From under grizzled brows the marshal regarded the Bar K rancher with real affection. "Leave a old-timer give you some advice, Larry," he said earnestly. "Stop worryin'."

From down the street sounded the jangle of chain traces as the Piñon Grove stage pulled away from the depot platform. As the four-horse team hoofed past the jail, the driver reined in and from his high seat waved a greeting.

"Hiya, Luke! Hiya, Larry!"

Larry nodded, and the marshal called back, "Hiya, Peaceful Paul, you old sinner."

The veteran driver grinned, and reached for his plug tobacco. The plug was shredded on the biting edge, because Peaceful Paul didn't have many teeth, and those he did have didn't hit very well. But he worried himself off a chew and chuckled.

"Well, I'm waitin'. Ain't you gonna heave me up some o' your double-distilled advice, Luke?"

"Yeah, you old tobacco-face sinner," the marshal growled, "I'll give you some advice. Start worryin'."

Peaceful Paul chuckled. "I'll take it under advisement." He gathered in the reins, bawled profanely at his lead team, and got going.

"You dish it out plumb indiscriminate," Larry commented. "You tell Peaceful to start worryin' and me to stop."

"K-rect. If you two'd split half and half on that you'd both be about perfect."

"What's Peaceful supposed to start worryin' about?"

"You know how he is. Been wheelin' out other people's gold from the Yellow Fork diggin's for so long he handles it like it was sacks of frijoles."

"You want him to start ridin' a shotgun guard?"

"K-rect."

"He's been twenty years on this run and never a holdup," Larry reminded.

"All the more reason for him to start carryin' a guard. He's been a long time crowdin' his luck."

"Peaceful Paul—why, he's friends to everybody and thinks everybody's *his* friend. Anyway, he's always armed."

"You don't know the half of it. That old hogleg he carries in the boot pocket, it ain't been loaded since he started the Yellow Fork runs."

Larry shrugged. "He'll probably live to an uneventful old age, while me, livin' the life of a safe and sane ex-horse-ranch owner, I'll probably die soon and violent."

The marshal gave a mild snort. "There you go—just like your old pappy. Best friend I ever had, but in the forty years I knowed him, he never stopped worryin'. You ain't an *ex*-ranch owner for another week yet."

From inside the barred window of the cell at their backs there sounded a scuffing on the puncheon floor.

"You got a jailhouse customer?" Larry asked in surprise.

The marshal lowered his voice. "This ain't a customer. It's an old buzzard they call Scalp Jackson. He come hazin' in one day, and I leave him sleep in the jail. He sweeps out for me and such. Reckon you might call him Piñon Grove's unofficial jailer."

The marshal felt his pockets. "Seein' Peaceful comb that plug of hisn through his teeth has sharpened my own tobacco hunger." He raised his voice. "Hey, Scalp, got a chew on you?"

FROM inside the cell a face pressed close to the window bars. It was a face buried to the eyes in wiry grizzled hair. The eyes looked out, little and bright. The lips parted to utter one guttural word, "Catch."

He dropped a well-gnawed plug of tobacco through the window. The marshal caught it, bit off a chew, and offered the plug to Larry. The young rancher shook his head.

"That's right, you don't use it, do you?" The marshal passed the plug back. A grimy hand with long fingernails reached through the bars and enveloped it.

"Thanks, Scalp," said the marshal.

Scalp Jackson grunted and moved back out of the sunlight which streamed through the window.

"Sociable critter, ain't he?" Larry remarked.

"Scalp's all right. Little bushed, that's all, from livin' alone so much. Thrown his blanket with Indians some. This dobe hoosegow reminds him of a cave, I reckon. That's why he likes it."

"Be livin' in a cave myself, the ways things are shapin' up for the Bar K." Larry grinned, trying to

put up a front. But the grin couldn't blank out the haunting despair from his eyes, nor tone out the bitterness from his voice.

The Bar K meant so much to him, and he had tried so damnably hard to hold it. Carved out of buffalo grazing grounds by his father and stocked originally with native mustangs, the ranch had been developed until now the Bar K brand meant something very special to anyone who appreciated good horses.

But Larry had been tagged by bad luck for three seasons running, the kind of luck that no man who lives off the land can avoid, luck determined by wrong combinations of wind and sun and water. And now the Piñon Grove Bank was substantially interested in the ranch. Next week, barring a miracle, it would take over.

"How much money could you get by on, son?" the marshal asked.

"If I could put up two thousand dollars, I could get an extension on the loan."

"Two thousand ain't much."

"It is if you ain't got it."

"You tried over Gravel Shoals way? Your pappy had a heap of friends thereabouts."

Larry nodded somberly. "I'm headin' out for there now. Figgerin' to stay out all week and brace every friend the Bar K ever had. But they been bad hit, too. Ain't likely they'll have money to lend."

Marshal Hill sighed. "Just you try not to worry, son."

He meant well, but he knew he was talking through his hat. It was a chore for him to meet Larry's worried eyes. "You've put up a good fight," he muttered. "Done all any man could do. So keep a tight rein. Lots can happen in a week."

Lots did.

THE fireworks started three days later with the Piñon Grove stage. Peaceful Paul was wheeling along through Rio Toro Canyon when he came to a place where two huge boulders clogged the trail. Their presence aroused no suspicion in the old driver's mind. There had been a rain. The boulders could have become dislodged and rolled down the slope.

Peaceful Paul brought his four-horse team to a stop, grumbling a little at the prospect of having to climb down and roll the boulders aside. To fortify himself for the task he pulled out his chewing tobacco. Sinking his scattered teeth in the plug, he shook his head like a terrier worrying a rat.

By the time he looked up, a man on horseback had left the concealment of a trailside thicket, and ridden close. The man was dressed in a swaddling oilskin slicker. Small glittering eyes looked out of a slit formed by his sombrero brim above, and a red bandanna that covered his face below. In his hand he held a six-shooter.

Peaceful Paul was so startled that he swallowed the chew of tobacco he had laboriously bitten off. He started swearing.

"That's gonna give me a stomach ache," he complained.

"No it won't," the gunman told him.

"It always does," Peaceful Paul argued.

"This time is different."

Peaceful Paul didn't read any sinister implication into the words. In the face of the close-boring six-gun, he just waited, still gripping in one hand the ragged-edged plug of tobacco and holding the other hand where the gunman could see that it was empty.

"The gold," the bandit reminded.

"In the stage boot, here by my feet."

"Hand it over."

Peaceful Paul bent—and came up with a single-action 45. His move was so entirely unexpected that he succeeded in lining the long-barreled gun on the bandit. His hand was steady. So was his voice.

"Makes it a stand-off," he said. "Can't either one of us shoot without jarrin' a bullet from tother. Start backin' away, stranger, and maybe so both of us can keep livin'."

The gunman laughed shortly and kneed his horse in closer. He reached out with his own gun and clubbed the single-action from Peaceful Paul's hand.

"The gold!" the bandit grated.

This time Peaceful Paul handed it over. There was nothing else to do. It was a good haul—some thirty thousand dollars in the peculiarly twisted nuggets from the Yellow Fork diggings. And in addition to the heavy pokes, a shipment of four thousand in gold coin from the Piñon Grove Bank.

The bandit stowed it all in his saddlebags. Peaceful Paul, with misery in his eyes, watched. All this gold, other people's gold that they had worked for and built dreams around, was lost to them now, stolen.

He couldn't expect any help from his passengers—two women, a little boy, and a timid leather-goods drummer from Pittsburgh. No, the gold was gone. He should have been riding a shotgun guard the way Luke Hill had wanted him to. Then probably no one would have been tough enough to try a stick-up.

What happened next was the occasion for some disagreement among the passengers. Not in principle. In detail merely. There was a shot.

A single close-up blast that sent gun echoes crashing through the canyon—and that made a lifeless hulk of old Peaceful Paul.

He took the bullet through the heart and slumped down there on the driver's seat. The terrified passengers were crowding the stage windows. They saw the gunman lean out of saddle briefly to bend over the driver's limp body. Then the bandit reared his horse around and rode down canyon.

So the way it turned out Peaceful Paul needn't have worried about that chew of tobacco he had swallowed. It didn't give him the stomach ache, after all.

IN reciting the experience afterward to Marshal Luke Hill in Piñon Grove, what the passengers disagreed about was the bandit's reason for killing Peaceful Paul. The women insisted he had shot callously, deliberately, in cold blood. The leather-goods drummer from Pittsburgh thought he might have become trigger-jitter there at the last and fired without meaning to.

But by and large, the citizenry of Piñon Grove spent little time in speculating on the killer's impulses. A man they had long known and loved had been cruelly, needlessly killed. Peaceful Paul, who had had no malice in his heart for any man on earth, had been blasted from earth by a murderer's bullet. And with his death, anger had grown in the hearts of Piñon Grove men, anger toward his killer.

They murmured restlessly at the end of the second day when Marshal Luke Hill admitted he was no nearer to a solution of the crime.

On the third day, with no new developments, they didn't murmur; they muttered, and talked openly of vigilante committees and lynchings.

Early on the morning of the fourth day after the murder, Larry Wander was waiting at the bank door when Elija Peppermill came to open up. Elija Peppermill was a good banker. Neither the killing of Peaceful Paul nor the loss of the bank's gold upset him to the point where they dampened his interest in the daily accounts receivable.

"Mornin'," the banker greeted Larry crisply. "Reckon as how you've come to take care of that note."

Elija Peppermill didn't reckon anything of the sort. He knew Larry was broke; that the young man's presence here on the last day of grace could mean only, as Larry himself had expressed it, that the Piñon Grove Bank was going into the horse-ranch business and Larry was going on the bum. That was why the banker's thin lips tightened in amazed disbelief, and his eyebrows crawled up a full half inch on his high smooth forehead when Larry nodded and said, "That's right, Mr. Peppermill. I've got the money with me."

Larry moved toward his horse, hitched at the bank rack, and hefted a sack from his saddlebag. Inside the bank, Elija Peppermill emptied the sack and there, behind his grilled window, counted out two thousand dollars in gold coin.

"Looks like that saves your neck," he said grudgingly. He looked thoughtful. "Then again," he said, squeezing the words from between pursed lips, "mebbe it don't."

"What you mean by that?" Larry demanded.

Elija Peppermill answered with a question of his own. "Where you been all week?"

"Over Gravel Shoals way."

"Doin' what?"

"Ridin' the hoofs off my horse tryin' to find somebody to loan me the two thousand."

"Who'd you borrow it from?"

"I dunno."

"You don't know!"

"Not for sure."

Elijah Peppermill's suspicion wasn't very thinly veiled now.

"What do you know for sure?"

Larry shrugged. "I just rode in last night. News don't percolate very fast in the Gravel Shoals country. Somethin' happened?"

Elijah Peppermill told him what had happened.

ALITTLE later, as he was leaving the bank, Larry bumped into Marshal Luke Hill. This last week the marshal's thoughts had been so focused on the Rio Toro crime that he had given little consideration to the plight of Larry Wander. Seeing Larry now, the marshal stopped, and his heart went out in quick sympathy.

"Tough break, son. But you put up a good fight. That's the main thing."

"Yeah," Larry said uncertainly. "Yeah."

"What you aimin' to do now?"

"Why—same like always."

"I mean, now that you've lost your ranch—"

"I haven't lost it," Larry cut in. "Not yet."

"Elijah give you an extension?"

"Yeah."

The marshal stared oddly. "But you needed two thousand for that."

"I got it," Larry said tightly. He returned the peace officer's shrewd gaze as long as he could, then his face flamed angrily. "You gonna be like old Peppermill? He didn't exactly accuse me of anything, but he looked aplenty. I know what he was thinkin'—"

"What was he thinkin', son?"

"That my two thousand was dead-man money, robbed from the Piñon Grove stage!"

"Where did you get it?"

"It ain't anybody's business, is it?"

Marshal Hill looked aggrieved. "Just askin', son. Not curiouslike, but as a friend."

"All right, as a friend I'll tell you," Larry said defiantly. "Somebody left it on my doorstep."

"Is that a friendly answer?" the marshal chided.

"You asked for it."

"I'm still askin'."

"And I'm still tellin' you! I came draggin' back last night from Gravel Shoals empty-handed. And I found two thousand dollars in gold coin on my doorstep. No note with it. I don't know where it came from; haven't had time yet to go inquirin'."

"Maybe you've made some guesses, though?"

"Could be damn near anybody," Larry asserted. "Dad had friends all over this country. More'n one of 'em, I reckon, felt enough indebted to him to have left that money."

"With no note to show where it came from?" the marshal said skeptically.

"Floored me, too, at first. Then I got to thinkin'. If somebody wanted to make me a gift for dad's sake, they'd have to do it this way, wouldn't they? If I knew who left it I'd insist on payin' 'em back."

The marshal didn't say anything.

"You don't believe me, do you?" Bitterness crowded Larry's voice. "You're the oldest friend I've got. If I can't tell you the truth and get believed, I can't tell anybody."

The marshal nodded gravely. "Still talkin' as a friend, leave me

give you some advice: Don't tell anybody. Like you say, they wouldn't believe you."

LARRY fooled around for a while in town, bought some supplies, somberly listened to the lynch talk in the barber shop where he got a haircut, and listened to more of it over a couple of beers in Whiskey Jack's saloon. He drove back to the Bar K in a buckboard. When he got there he found a visitor sitting on his porch.

The visitor was Marshal Luke Hill.

The marshal came right to the point. "I took it upon myself to meddle around here a bit, Larry. I found this." He held up a nondescript canvas bag.

Larry bristled. "So what?"

"Suppose you tell me."

"It's the bag the gold was in."

"The gold you claim was left on your front steps?"

"That's right," Larry flared. "And it ain't one of the bank bags, if that's what you're thinkin'. Just an ordinary old canvas bag that anybody could have."

"K-rect." The marshal's face hardened. "But the bag I found in your tool shed wasn't an ordinary bag. Take a look. Maybe you can explain it."

The marshal reached inside the door, produced a money sack with the name of the Piñon Grove Bank woven in the fabric. He turned the bag upside down and shook it. A bit of bright yellow dust sifted out and a few tiny nuggets struck the porch floor.

When Larry examined the nuggets and, minute as they were, identified them by their peculiarly twisted shape.

"Yellow Fork gold," the marshal said grimly.

Larry looked up. The marshal was covering him with drawn six-gun.

"I'm havin' to arrest you, son," he announced. "For the robbery of the Piñon Grove stage and the murder of Peaceful Paul."

The blood drained from Larry's face.

"You . . . you're locoed!" he blurted finally. "Even if it looks bad for me about the gold, you know me—you know I'd never gun down Peaceful Paul."

"You're not a born killer," the marshal said heavily. "That's right. But one of the passengers on the stage opined the gun might have gone off accidental. Stagecoach robin' bein' a new line for you, it's easy to see how you could of got trigger-jittered—"

"It's a lie!" Larry shouted hoarsely. "The whole thing is made out of nothin'—" He started forward.

"Don't crowd my gun," the sheriff warned harshly. "You're the last man in the world I want to be takin' in. But I'm sworn to uphold the law, Larry. All my life I've dealt out justice, fair and impartial as I've seen it. I ain't gonna start twistin' it now to the advantage of my friends. Anyhow, Peaceful Paul was my friend, too."

"And mine!" Larry cried.

"When a man is killed," the marshal said implacably, "all the law asks is who killed him. I myself think that's where the law is wrong. It ought to go more into the whys and wherefors. But the law's the law—and I got to take you in."

BACK in Piñon Grove, the marshal routed out Scalp Jackson, who was dozing on the cell bunk, and installed Larry Wander in the cell instead.

The place wasn't any refuge to Larry as it had been to the elemental-minded Scalp. Outraged innocence made the young rancher burn with a consuming fire. He had told the whole truth to the marshal. Yet here he was, guilty before the world.

Like a caged grizzly, he raged about the cell, shaking the iron door and gripping the bars in the high window. It didn't do any good, of course. The door rattled, that was all, while the window bars, tight in their wooden frame, and in turn deep-buried in the thick, sun-baked adobe wall, defied his most strenuous efforts to loosen them.

It was while he tugged at the window bars that he became aware of his truly desperate position. He had thought he faced a trial for his life, sometime in the future. But something happened at the window which showed him that he faced death, not in the future, but now—death unencumbered by a court trial.

A stone came whizzing through the window. Then another stone and a third. A flung whiskey bottle broke against the iron bars and showered glass on the cell floor.

The news that Peaceful Paul's killer had been jailed was spreading like wildfire. The muttering which had grown from a restless murmur, welled to a roar, the hideous roar of the pack on a blood trail. The mob about the jail grew. The hooting and hollering, punctured by occasional gunshots, beat at Larry with the force of physical blows, foreshadowing the death by violence in store for him if the mob should rush the jail.

And what was to keep them from rushing it? Larry listened in vain for the voice of Marshal Luke Hill. He should, by all rights, be exhorting the lynch mob to go home and allow justice to take its legal course. But

Larry didn't hear a single pipe out of the marshal. What did it mean? Had the old lawman run out on him? Luke Hill took such a firm position on law enforcement, that, on sheer circumstantial evidence, he had brought a friend to stand trial for his life. Then why wasn't he out there protecting his prisoner from this pack of wolves who wanted to take the law into their own hands.

There was only one thing for Larry to conclude. The marshal himself must be implicated in the stage stick-up and murder of Peaceful Paul. And he was framing the crime to Larry! After Larry had been seized and lynched, the mob, having glutted itself with a victim, would disperse. The talk would die down, and the marshal to the end of his days would be left in security with his blood-washed gold.

Larry felt a pang of disloyalty at entertaining such thoughts about a lifelong friend. The whole thing was incredible, fantastic. But what else could he believe?

Bitterness, in a blinding wave, engulfed him. What had he done to deserve this? But even while he asked it he knew that it wasn't what a fellow deserved; it was what he got. Life had handed him one knockout blow after another. He hadn't laid down; he hadn't stopped fighting. But here he was now, punched into a fix where his former friends howled for his blood. And not one single man to stand up for him—

Yes, there was, after all! One man! And he barely an acquaintance! One man. Scalp Jackson! Above the clamor of the mob, Larry could hear Scalp Jackson's guttural voice.

"Git back! Git back! I'll let go with this shotgun! You ain't gonna take him. I'm the jailer. The mar-

shal put him under my charge, and you ain't gonna take him. Git back!"

A sympathetic identity with the eccentric old man surged through Larry. Deserted by all his friends; and Scalp Jackson, half-Indian, half-animal, stood stubbornly by him!

The clamor at the front of the jail lessened, and for a while Larry had hope that Scalp with his scattergun had won out. But it was a false hope. Marshal Luke Hill might have been clever enough to talk them down, but Scalp wasn't handy with words. The best he could do was to keep them from entering the door on the other side of the building. That wasn't enough.

Larry read a finish to the whole grim business in close immediate sounds at the jail window.

Despairingly, he froze back against the window wall. No bullet could reach him there. But it wasn't bullets he had to fear. Not then. The end of a rope whipped in between the bars. A hand reached through and threaded the rope back. Unseen hands tied a slip knot. The rope sawed at the bars as the knot tightened to an outside pull.

LARRY sprang to the cell window, only to be driven back by a hail of bullets. But he knew what was happening. The other end of this rope was cinched to a saddlehorn. A sturdy cutting pony would put on speed. The same technique used in throwing a fractious steer would be applied here. The barred window frame would be yanked from the ancient adobe wall! And then they would have him.

At the front of the jail, Scalp Jackson had held the wolf pack at bay. But they would reach him now through the window. The rope was already tightening!

The shouting increased to a savage roar. The rope thrummed, quivered as it drew taut. There was an instant when it seemed the force was not going to be enough. Then with a thudding crash the window frame went out. Not only the frame, but below the window a section of the wall wide enough to run a horse through was torn away; and with its tearing came a sudden jarring hush.

The shouts and the yammering died as the jail raiders stared in frozen disbelief at something revealed in the gap torn in the adobe wall.

Larry, in the jail cell, couldn't see what it was that had riveted their attention. He didn't try to see. It was enough for him that their blood lust had been momentarily sidetracked. Whatever had stilled their shouts and bulged their eyes was important to Larry only because it gave him a chance for life he hadn't expected.

Before the men could recover their wits and rush the newly torn gap in the cell wall, Larry rushed out at them. The crumbling adobe was still spilling forward over the ground as he sprang. But he held his footing and rammed in among them before anyone could shoot. His big fists pounded right and left, clearing a path to the horse rack.

In close this way, he knew they would hesitate to shoot for fear of endangering their own crowd. With luck, then, he might be able to reach one of the horses. With more luck, he might get away, though by the time he was in saddle they would be shooting. His chances weren't so good, certainly, but he was up on his feet and fighting. That was something.

He never did find out if he could have made it or not. Before he had

even fought his way to the hitch rack, another disturbance at the front of the jail caught his ear. There was a shout in a familiar voice—Marshal Luke Hill's voice. And the roaring of guns; the bark of a six-shooter and the deep-mouthed bel-low of a shotgun.

Ducking a swung fist, Larry landed a hard body punch, pivoted to avoid a bull rush from another man, and got his feet going in the direction where the marshal was locked in deadly embrace with Scalp Jackson. Even as Larry glimpsed them, he saw the marshal go down under a crushing short-arm blow. Scalp Jackson raised the shotgun to crash it against the marshal's skull.

Larry's feet pounded gravel. His big fist started its swing before he was anywhere near, but he came in so fast that his timing on the blow was perfect. He seemed to know instinctively that he was helping the right man when his knuckles sank with a solid *thup* against Scalp Jackson's hairy jaw. Jackson's feet left the ground and he was fifteen feet away—and unconscious—by the time he stopped rolling.

The marshal sat up and surveyed the scene with groggy eyes. There was blood matting his hair on one side of his head. Larry noticed that it was dried, black, clotted blood. It had not come from a recent wound.

"First off," he announced a bit shakily, "Larry ain't the one. It was Scalp Jackson killed Peaceful Paul."

It took a moment for the words to sink in. Then there was a collective growl from the massed men and a rushing movement toward Scalp Jackson, where he lay in a tangled heap on the ground.

"Save your strength," the marshal advised caustically. "I killed him

myself. My six-gun got him when I swapped for his shotgun lead. He was dead on his feet when Larry clipped him. But I'd 'a' been dead, too, if Larry hadn't come in when he did."

"Goes double, partner," said Larry. "They had my goose about cooked when you showed up. Where the hell you been?"

IT takes some tellin'." The mar-shal pulled in a deep breath. "Right after I got you locked up I found out it was Scalp done the stagecoach job, not you. Scalp done it and set out to frame you. You mind he overheard us the day we were talkin' in front of the jail, mentionin' about Peaceful Paul never goin' loaded, and about you needin' the two thousand? Cunnin' as an animal, Scalp was. He left that gold for you on the porch just the way you told me. He done that to head suspicion your way when you paid up at the bank. Then he left the money bag with the siftin's of Yellow Fork gold in it where it would be found in your tool shed. That was to clinch you to the crime and—"

"Which it shore did!" Larry finished.

"But right after I got you locked up I found out my mistake." The marshal raised a groping hand to his blood-matted hair. "I found out Scalp Jackson was the one, and I called him on it. He was too quick for me. Let me have it alongside my head and left me for dead on the floor of my own house. But I'm pretty tough. I came around and . . . and I got here just in time for the fireworks."

Larry nodded excitedly. "That explains why Scalp Jackson took up a stand in front of the jail and made a pass at protectin' me. He was

figurin' afterward to get credit for it, and forever throw off any suspicion from himself. Figured likely that someone would shoot me anyhow through the window—”

“Stead of which,” an abashed rancher put in, “we dabbed a loop on the jail bars and yanked out half the wall!”

“The town'll have to buy me a new jail,” the marshal threatened. He stood up and started rummaging through his clothes. “Who's got a chaw of tobacco?”

“You got one in your hand,” someone pointed out.

“Can't eat that one. I'm sentimental about it.”

“What's special about it? Looks like an ordinary plug to me.”

“It is, exceptin' for the way it's bit off on one side. Ragged, shredded, as though whoever had been workin' on it had to kind of saw it off between teeth that didn't come together much—”

“Peaceful Paul!”

“K-rect. When I went through Peaceful's clothes and didn't find no plug, I wondered about it. I kept lookin'. Then I found this one in the box where Scalp Jackson kept his truck. He was like a squirrel for storin' away odds and ends of stuff. He had the butts on half a dozen plugs. But only this one was ragged the way Peaceful Paul's always was. I figgered that after Scalp had made his kill he seen the plug, maybe in Peaceful's hand, and he figgered why should he leave good tobacco go to waste. So he just took it. It made enough of a clue for me to start puttin' things together and call him on it. The rest you know. Lord knows where we'll ever find—”

A chuckle broke out somewhere in the crowd. It caught on, rippling into a general laugh that blew off a

lot of pent-up tension in a hurry. Before the marshal knew what was happening, he found himself being borne along in a mob rush.

Around the corner of the jail the mob spread away on all sides after depositing the marshal forcibly on top of the crumpled adobe which had been torn from the wall at the same time the bars had been yanked out.

Nobody had to say anything. The lawman could see—the same thing the others had seen when the jail wall had let go. The thing which had stunned them into speechless inactivity and given Larry his chance to make a break.

Gold! The sun had shone on it as the yellow metal, in coin and nuggets, had splashed from the crashing wall. Gold! The sun still shone on it, sending yellow, exciting glints from cracks and crevasses of the broken adobe.

“Well, shoe my dogs!” the marshal gasped. “Gold in the jail-house wall. See how it was? Livin' by himself in there, old Scalp had plenty of chance to hollow him out a hole in the dirt wall where he could hide the gold. And it wasn't a bad stunt. Who'd ever think of lookin' in the jail for stolen gold?”

“I reckon,” Larry Wander's voice sounded weary, “this closes the case complete—except for the two thousand dollars of their own money that I paid over to the bank this mornin'.”

The marshal regarded him severely. “Leave me give you some advice, young fella; forget it. The whole town owes you somethin' for its mistake about you. And I, personally, owe you my life. We'll talk to 'em at the bank; we'll figger out somethin'. Trouble with you, Larry, you worry too much.”



The Story of the West

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

As early as 1821 sheep raising, which had been introduced into this country by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century, had become a major industry in New Mexico. As a matter of fact, sheep were the principal stable production of that territory as well as its chief export.

The industry was, however, badly hampered during the early days by frequent Indian raids. Redskins attacked ranch-

ers, murdered shepherds and drove the sheep away in flocks of thousands. They were even said to have boasted that they preferred to leave a few sheep behind for breeding purposes in order that there would be a constant supply. It was, therefore, to the war whoop of the Apache, the Navaho, the Jicarilla and the Comanche that another of the West's great industries took root and grew.



When this New Mexico territory was at its zenith of prosperity ranchos were to be found on the borders of every stream and in the vicinity of every mountain where water was to be had. Even on the arid plains and desert lands and many miles away from creeks or ponds, immense flocks were driven out to pasture and only taken to water once in two or three days. On these occasions it was necessary for the shepherds to load their burros with "aguajes" filled with water and return again with their herds to the plains.

During this period, there were enormous ranchos scattered over half the province, in some cases supporting as much as a half million head of sheep. Trade was carried on between New Mexico and the southern markets, and from

1821 up to the outbreak of the Mexican War the trade grew in volume. Approximately two hundred thousand head of sheep were annually driven to southern markets, and some years as many as five hundred thousand head were exported.

These sheep drives were particularly important up to the time of the discovery of gold in California when many herds were diverted to that region in response to the new demands. These importations had much to do with California's flying start in sheep ranching.

During the days of the California gold rush, sheep driven from New Mexico to the gold fields sold as high as sixteen dollars a head. Gold panning developed big appetites!

NEXT WEEK: THE SIEGE OF PAWNEE ROCK



UNLIKE most of his fellow wild things, Chisel-tooth, the yellow-haired porcupine, went about his business stolid and unafraid. That fear of fang and claw which keeps the deer, the rabbit, the chipmunk forever alert to the danger of attack by hungry enemies bothered him but little.

DEAD MAN'S VENGEANCE

by S. OMAR BARKER

True, he recognized the coyote, the lynx cat, the mountain lion, even the one prospector's dog on False Creek as natural enemies, since they were eaters of meat; but he never fled in terror when they came near. Nor did he face them. He turned his back on them, bristled the myriad needle-sharp spears on his back and muscular tail, and waited. If they ventured too close, Chisel-tooth's tail struck with a speed and force remarkable in an animal otherwise so stolid and slow-moving.

The quills driven into unwary flesh by a single blow of his tail carried more of pain and misery than many a slash of fang or rake of claw. For nature had given him plenty of them, all loosely enough socketed in his coarse, thick skin so that they came out easily and stuck wherever their hard, black needle points hit, working in deeper and deeper, festering the flesh, at best resulting in weeks of agony; at worst, in death.

The few cougars and cats who had tackled Chisel-tooth, being cautious of approach and quick of paw, had suffered no more than a few stray quills in foot or foreleg. Coyotes often followed him, curious, yet too wary actually to attack. But old Pete Butler's dog, a ringy, Airedaleish cur of miscellaneous ancestry, strong on courage but short on caution, had taken his full dose of

quills from three vigorous tail-slaps smack in the muzzle before he had sense enough to quit.

That was what had caused, or at least touched off, the quarrel and bust-up of partnership between the two grizzly-whiskered prospectors of False Creek. When Mica, the dog, showed up one morning with a face full of porcupine quills, old Henry Kasselmann at once proposed to shoot him.

"The damn cur ain't good for nothin' but to keep us et out of a grubstake, anyhow," he declared. "Now's a good time to git shot of him."

But already Pete Butler was starting to pull out the quills. He knelt astride the dog, holding Mica's head down with one hand, yanking out quills with a pair of pliers held in the other. Mica whined with pain, but did not struggle much until Pete yanked at one of the white-shafted spines that bristled from his sensitive nose. There the pain was too much for him. He yelped and struggled to break free.

"Pore feller," Pete said. "Henry, I wisht you'd loan me a little of yore whiskey to pour on his nose. Maybe that'd kind o' ease the pain, so's I could—"

"My whiskey ain't to spare," grunted Kasselmann. "I'll loan you a bullet for him, though."

Pete Butler was a mild, quiet-spoken man for all his great size and strength.

"Then I wisht you'd look in that doctor book you got an' see if it tells anything about softenin' up porky quills. They're hurtin' the pore feller somethin' terrible."

Kasselmann reached down a dusty copy of Dr. Pierce's Home Medical Adviser from a high shelf. There was malice and a note of

taunting in his voice as he offered it.

"Here—look for it yourself, Pete."

"You know I can't read, Henry," Butler said it patiently. "I wisht you'd—"

"Let the dog read it!" Kasselmann laughed harshly as he put the book back up on the high shelf where it was seldom touched. "Or ain't he got no brains neither?"

A new look, hard and determined, replaced the anxiety in Pete Butler's usually mild, pale-blue eyes.

"Kasselmann," he said, "you and me been pardners for goin' on two years, an' I ain't never sassed back at you fer gravelin' me about my iggerunce, nor I ain't aimin' to now. But this here dog is sufferin' an' I can't hold him to git them quills out of his nose an' mouth by myself. You git down here an' help me, or I'll—"

"You'll what?"

"I'll twist yore scrawny neck!"

SOMETHING in the quiet way he said it brought a look of fear into the other man's eyes, and with it, because he was afraid, something of hate. He looked at the two battered, short-barreled .44 rifles racked on a pair of deer horns on the cabin wall, then shrugged. Pete Butler might be ignorant and dog crazy, but Kasselmann remembered that his willing muscles came in mighty handy on the swing end of a pick or a drill sledge.

"You got no call to get tough about it, Pete," he said. He knelt grudgingly and seized the dog's head, holding it hard against the rough floor.

"Better let me hold him an' you yank out the quills," advised Butler. "I'm stronger in the hands, an' he trusts me better."

"I've got him. Git to yankin'!"

At the first painful drawing of a quill from his nose, Mica whimpered, yelped, and struggled free of Kasselmann's grip. Not viciously, but only crazed by fright and pain, the dog snapped at the man. Mica was not a young dog, and his fangs were worn blunt from much chewing of roots and rotten logs while digging for rabbits that he rarely caught. They did not even break the skin on Kasselmann's wrist.

But with an oath, the already angry man jerked back and sprang to his feet. He kicked the dog full in the belly, then turned quickly and grabbed down one of the battered .44s. He did not need to lever in a shell, for it was his own gun, and he always kept it loaded—a needless hazard which Pete Butler had often protested.

"Bite me, will you?" Kasselmann snarled, swinging the gun downward to aim point-blank at the dog. "I'll kill the—"

Even as the hammer clicked back under his thumb, Pete Butler's big body lunged, one fist striking away the gun, the other smashing into Kasselmann's face. The lead slug ripped splinters from the puncheon floor. The pungent reek of black powder filled the cabin.

Without the rifle, Kasselmann did not have a chance. He sat on the floor, swearing at the big man who stood over him. The grizzly whiskers of both of them bristled with anger. Mica slunk against Pete Butler's legs, whimpering.

"You ortn't to blow up thataway, Henry," Butler reproved. "Mica wouldn't bite you a-purpose. Them quills was jest hurtin' him to where he—"

"Get out!" Kasselmann's voice was a snarl. "Take your damn cur

an' get out! Lemme ketch either of you anywhere near my cabin again an' I'll shoot you on sight!"

"I got the same rights to this cabin as you got," said Pete Butler, whose muscles had hewn and lifted most of the logs to build it. "I ort to bust your neck fer you—an' I will if you ever try shootin' my dog ag'in!"

He picked up Kasselmann's gun, got his own from the rack, set them both outside the door and yanked it shut.

"I'll git out, Kasselmann," he said, and there was a force in his words that came as much from character as from the superior strength of his body. "But first you an' me are goin' to relieve this pore dog. I'll hold him. You take them pliers an' yank out the quills. An' see that you don't bust none of 'em off, neither!"

Kasselmann cursed and raged, but he obeyed. In half an hour Mica's only remaining souvenir of his encounter with Chisel-tooth was a sore and bloody head. There were no quills left to bore in and in, festering flesh and bone.

WHEN they had finished, Pete Butler began gathering together his personal belongings. He worked at it in silence, but with a wary eye out to see that his sullen ex-partner made no move toward the guns outside the door. It was characteristic of the bigger man that he threw far less than half the grub supplies into his ruck sack.

Nor did he make any reply to the stream of sneering taunts hurled at him from where Kasselmann sat on his bunk. Presently he swung the bulky pack to his shoulder and stepped outside. He picked up both of the carbines in his free hand.

"I'm comin' back to the claim this afternoon fer my share of the tools, Henry. After I git 'em, I'll leave you your gun somewherees where you'll find it."

"Hell," Kasselmann taunted him contemptuously, "what good are tools to an ignoramus that don't know quartz from shale? Once you quit False Creek, who you goin' to git to show you where to dig?"

"I ain't quittin' False Creek, Henry. Not as long as there's a chance of me hittin' that vein we been driftin' fer. That's how come I feel obliged not to leave you no cartridges. Time you've been to Altos after some, maybe you'll kind o' cool down."

"An' maybe I won't!" There was venom in Kasselmann's tone, and as he watched the departure of the big, uncomplaining man who for nearly two years had done most of the hard labor of their prospecting partnership, there was a look of hatred in his eyes.

"I'll learn him what it costs to manhandle Henry Kasselmann," he muttered, wiping the blood from his nose. "If it takes to my dying day!"

Late that evening Kasselmann prowled around the hill to the claim where they had been working out a drift tunnel in search of the vein of gold-bearing quartz whose existence, according to prospector geology, was definitely indicated by specimens of float they had found up and down False Creek.

Butler had come and taken away his share of the tools. Near the mouth of the tunnel Kasselmann found a strip of wood from a dynamite case whittled to the shape of an arrow, its shaft stuck in the ground. Even though Pete Butler could not read nor write, the old

prospector's sign language was plain enough. Racked in the lower limbs of a blue spruce where the arrow pointed was Kasselmann's rifle. The sharp pricking of spruce needles as he climbed up after it did not improve his temper.

As he straddled a limb for a moment to catch his wind before starting back down, a big porcupine came waddling nonchalantly down the hill. Instinctively Kasselmann raised his gun, then cursed as he remembered that he had no cartridges.

Chisel-tooth, quirking his blunt black nose with interest, ambled up to the remains of the dynamite box from which Butler had whittled the arrow. He sniffed it briefly, then began gnawing on it. His brownish-yellow teeth cut the wood like chisels, making a soft, raspy sound. He paused only to blink his black little eyes inquiringly as the man swung down out of the tree a few yards away. Then he went on gnawing.

Kasselmann picked up a club and advanced with it raised, ready to strike. Purely as a matter of caution, Chisel-tooth turned his back, "balled up," bristling a threatening array of black-pointed and white-shafted quills from tail tip to forehead.

The club had already started its downward swing to bash out Chisel-tooth's brains when suddenly Kasselmann changed his mind. He tossed the club away down the hill and a crooked grin showed through the grizzled thatch of his whiskers. It had suddenly occurred to him that the fewer porcupines he killed, the more likely that damn dog of Butler's would be to get another dose of quills.

Butler had said he aimed to stay on False Creek. Knowing the qual-

ity of his erstwhile partner's determination, Kasselmann did not doubt it. He wondered where Butler would stake his claim. The thought came to him that, dumb though he was, Butler might just be lucky enough to be the first to hit the vein they had been seeking. The thought fed the bitterness in him like the rotten wood of an old log feeds a smoldering fire.

"I'll git even with him, some way!" he muttered as he started back to the cabin.

Chisel-tooth, unaware of playing any part in the affairs of man, resumed his gnawing. Green stuff and particularly the tender inner bark of yellow pines were his normal food. But here was a faint flavor of salt from the touch of men's sweaty hands which was a pleasing variation in his usual diet.

THE next day Henry Kasselmann set out on the two-day burro ride into the foothill village of Altos after cartridges. There, into every ear that would listen, including that of Deputy Sheriff Smithson, he poured his story of the bust-up. He warned storekeepers not to let Pete Butler charge any further purchases against the partnership. He entered a new filing on his claim, leaving Butler's name out of it. With a crafty show of regret, he spread the word that Butler had threatened to kill him.

To Deputy Smithson he went even further.

"I ain't no hand for trouble, Smithson, an' I don't aim to stir none up if I can help it. But when a simple-headed feller like Butler makes threats to kill me, I figger the law ought to be informed of it."

"That's right," agreed Smithson, but without apparent conviction. He had observed a good many quar-

rels between desert rat and prospector partners before. More often than not they patched it up again once their first mad wore off. Sometimes they carried on such a feud for years, but mostly by not speaking to each other when they chanced to meet. Normally the breed was not much given to violence. He had met Butler a time or two, and did not consider the man dangerous. But of course you never knew.

"Just try an' keep your shirt on, Kasselmann," he advised. "Leave him cool off awhile. I'll try an' ride up that way one of these days an' kind o' talk to him. When you figger you're goin' to hit that vein an' come traipsin' in here with a burro load of gold?"

"I sure as hell aim to strike it before Butler does," grunted Kasselmann. "Providin' he don't start no more trouble."

"Well, if he does, you let me know."

"Much obliged, Smithson. If it don't come right down to a matter of self-defense, I will."

Only at the drugstore, where he had made his first call, did Kasselmann fail to mention the quarrel. There he bought a small vial of strychnine, stowing it inside his shirt with the bottle of whiskey he was taking back to the cabin.

"Aimin' to poison me a few coyotes, come winter," he explained to the storekeeper. "That is, if fur's a good price an' I ain't struck pay rock first."

But Kasselmann's efforts to poison Pete Butler's dog proved a failure. With the idea of discouraging Mica from tackling porcupines again, old Pete had put a muzzle on him, which prevented him from picking up poison baits or anything else edible in the woods.

Throughout the summer the silent feud upon False Creek rocked along without incident. Pete Butler built himself a rough lean-to for shelter, staked out a new claim and went to work. He made a couple of trips in to Altos for supplies but did not mention the bust-up. When people asked him about it, he merely shrugged. If they were insistent, he suggested mildly that it was nobody's business but his and Kasselmann's. Deputy Smithson happened to be out of town both times he came in, and cattle thievery out on the flats kept him too busy to remember his promise to ride up False Creek and give Pete Butler a talking to.

Working alone, both prospectors found their efforts discouraging. Pete Butler, because he was doubtful of his judgment of mineralogy—veins, the drift of certain formations—all the necessary information of which Kasselmann always seemed to know so much. Kasselmann, on the other hand, cursed because without Pete Butler's driving strength on the job, his drift tunnel made slow progress.

Daily they could hear each other at work, no more than a quarter mile apart. But as for human contact, they might as well have been the inhabitants of different worlds.

It lurked in the back of Pete's mind that some day, perhaps, they would patch it up. Nevertheless, he remembered Kasselmann's hatred of the dog, and kept Mica close at his side. It was more on the dog's account than his own that he always carried his rifle to the diggings with him.

When Kasselmann showed up one day at his claim, Pete picked up the gun, just as a precaution, but he greeted his one-time pardner civilly.

Kasselmann's answer was a taunting laugh.

"Diggin' a hole to bury your dog in?" he inquired. "If you ever find gold in that kind of rock, num-skull, I'll eat it! Besides—I just dropped down to tell you the news: I've struck it, an' by gosh, she's rich!"

For a gloating instant Kasselmann saw something like discouragement cross Pete Butler's face. Then without answering, Butler picked Mica up in his arms, turned and walked away.

Kasselmann raised his gun and sighted along the heavy octagon barrel at the middle of Butler's back. Then, reluctantly, he lowered it. It might be hard, he realized, to convince Deputy Smithson—or a jury—that a bullet in the back had been fired in self-defense.

From the size of Butler's dump he could not help noticing how much faster the other man's search for the coveted vein was progressing than his own. Nor did it ease the bitterness in him any to remind himself that the boast with which he had taunted Pete Butler was an out-and-out lie. So absorbed was he in nursing his hatred that when he returned to his cabin he racked his rifle without remembering to uncock it.

CHISEL-TOOTH had spent a lazy summer, fattening on pine-bark pulp, wild raspberries and the tender leaves of jimson weed and mountain willow. A night or two after Kasselmann's visit to Pete Butler's claim, the porcupine, most of whose travel was aimless, happened for the first time to discover Kasselmann's cabin. It was the sound of his tentative gnawing at the back doorstep, food-flavored by bachelor carelessness, that jerked Kasselmann sud-

denly out of uneasy slumber. At the sound of the man thumping out of the bunk, Chisel-tooth paused to listen.

Then Kasselmann's voice spoke thumping out of the bunk, Chisel-tooth paused to listen.

Kasselmann's voice spoke hoarsely from inside the cabin. "Who the hell's prowlin' out there?"

Chisel-tooth backed closer into the shadow of the doorway and raised his bristles. They made a soft scratching sound against the wood.

To Kasselmann, obsessed with hatred and the constant desire for getting even with Pete Butler, it sounded like the soft-pawed scratching of a dog. Pete Butler's dog, of course. This time he'd take care of that four-legged nuisance.

Reaching up, he took the .44 from its antlered rack and eased toward the door. In the darkness his bare foot struck the point of a freshly sharpened pick he had left leaning carelessly against the table. Still unsteady with sleep, he tripped, throwing the gun from him, as he sprawled headlong.

In the roar of its discharge he was aware of something like the blow of a fist striking him on the chest, but for an instant he did not realize that it was the bullet from his own cocked gun, which had discharged in his direction when he flung it from him.

At first, even after he had lit the lamp and seen the blood soaking through his underwear, it did not dawn on Kasselmann that the wound was fatal. It was when he coughed and felt the spume of lung blood in his throat that he realized all at once that here was death. Then the first thought that came into his hate-distorted mind was

that Pete Butler's damn dog had done this to him. For this he would get even with Pete if it took to his dying day.

With the grim realization that this vague future time had now arrived, a twisted expression not unlike a grin of triumph came to his face.

Dying—yes. But Pete Butler would pay for it, just the same! He'd learn that knot-head to monkey with Henry Kasselmann!

Sitting there on the edge of his bunk, without strength enough to go to the table for a pencil, Kasselmann set the lamp on the floor, bent over the dried-apple box which had been used for a lamp stand, and on its white wood surface, using his finger for pen, wrote a message in his own blood:

Sept 3 1909 Thinking I struck it rich
Pete Butler my expardner come back to
my cabin this date and murdered me with-
out warning.

HENRY KASSELmann.

The second day that Pete Butler failed to hear Kasselmann working at his claim, he began to get worried. A check of tracks showed that Kasselmann had not gone out the trail to town. Late in the evening of the third day he decided to investigate. After all, even an ornery old coot like Kasselmann was a human being, and if he were sick, somebody ought to look after him.

He found Kasselmann's body stretched out on the bunk, his blood spattered around the room. When he saw the box with writing on it, Butler scratched his head. Once again he earnestly wished that he could read. But since he couldn't there was only one thing to do: get somebody who could.

Some twenty-four hours later he banged his big fist urgently on the

door of Deputy Sheriff Smithson's home in Altos. Smithson was away, his wife said. He would be back in the morning. Was it something important?

"It's a dead man, ma'am," said Pete Butler, "an' a message wrote in blood. I'll wait, so I can guide him in by the shortest trail."

CHISEL-TOOTII viewed the open door of the cabin with interest. In his haste, Pete Butler had failed to latch it securely and the wind had swung it open. Leisurely, with his usual stolid caution, Chisel-tooth waddled inside, his black, snubby nose wrinkling with curiosity.

At near dark two evenings later, Chisel-tooth looked down from the pine branch where he had been snoozing all day, and decided that even for a porcupine, it would be wiser to postpone climbing down to visit the cabin again until these numerous man creatures had gone, or at least quieted down, as they usually seemed to do, for the night.

The man creatures were Deputy Sheriff Smithson, another deputy, and Pete Butler. Wholly unsuspecting of the surprise in store for him, the big prospector led the way inside.

"All I done," he explained, "I jest drawed a blanket over Henry's face an' left things like they was. The writin's on that there box. I'll strike a light so's you can read it!"

He lit the smudge-chimneyed lamp that Henry Kasselmann had been careful to extinguish before he died, lest somehow it might set fire to the cabin and destroy the vengeance he had prepared.

"There's the box," began Butler. "The writin' on the end, where it's smooth—" He broke off abruptly.

"Why . . . why what s happened to it?"

Deputy Smithson bent over to pick up what remained of the box, turning first one end and then the other to the light.

In a puzzled tone he read:

" . . . thinking . . . Pete . . . utler my . . . pardn . . . come back . . . "

The rest of the box end was nothing but a mass of unpatterned gouges.

When he had made a slow, thorough examination, finding the exploded shell in Kasselmann's .44, the bruise where his toe had struck the pick, Deputy Smithson spoke his opinion:

"Looks like he got up to shoot at somethin'-like as not a prowlin' porky—stabbed his toe in the dark an' accidentally shot hisself instead. Realized he was a goner an' tried to leave a message—which some ol' porcupine has got in here an' gnawed all to hell, so nobody won't never know what he was trying to say."

"Not for sure, o' course," said Pete Butler, his eyes solemn. "But you know what I think? I figger when he seen he was done fer, he got to thinkin' an' wanted his ol' pardner to come back to him. Jest proves ol' Henry wasn't near as mean-minded as he made out to be!"

This, then, was the dead man's vengeance: to be spoken well of by the simple man he had sought to ruin.

Up in a pine tree outside, Chisel-tooth, wholly unaware of the part he had played in the affairs of men, waited stolidly for these intruders to depart. The faint apple flavor of that box had been much to his taste.



GUN PURGE AT TENTROCK

by PETER DAWSON

SID REMINGTON, foreman of Jim Sloan's Tentrock spread, walked his black gelding down the steep incline of the alley to halt finally within the impenetrable shadow of a lean-to in the rear of Hilton's Mile High Saloon. He sat a moment warily studying the obscure darkness around him. Then he called softly, "Turk, that you?"

A shadow a shade lighter than that of the saloon's rear log wall

moved across the narrow alley and took on a man's shape.

"Took you long enough to get here," a voice said irritably. "A hell of a time to drag me in on a twelve-mile ride."

Remington swung from his saddle and ground-haltered the black. "Don't crow yet, Turk," he slowly drawled. "You'll be glad enough you came."

Remington's high frame was ac-

centuated by a gauntness that made his motions awkward and ungainly. His face was so thin that its bone pattern had a skull-like prominence and deep-socketing cold gray eyes that were as clear an indication of his character as the twin belts and holsters he wore tonight along his thighs.

"Phil Royer drift up this way today?" he demanded abruptly.

"Did he? He's in there now, so tanked he can hardly count his fingers. They say he's been askin' to see me." Turk Exin, blocky of build and slow but sure-witted, had to tilt his head up to meet Remington's glance.

"Askin' for you? Then the whole thing's workin' out better than I thought."

"What thing?" Turk's irritation was falling away before a rising curiosity.

"Didn't you hear what happened?" Remington asked.

"How could I? We've been workin' that herd across to the railroad. The crew's loadin' tonight. By sunup, those critters ought to be on their way out."

"One of my line riders spotted the break in the fence at nine this mornin'," Remington said, with seeming irrelevance. "By the time the boss and the rest of us got up there and found the herd gone, it was past eleven. Sloan sent the others on, followin' sign. Him and me headed straight for the line shack to see what had happened to Royer. We found him there laying on the floor, his head bleedin'. He was out cold."

"He might have stopped us last night," Turk explained. "I took care of him first."

"It looked like one of your jobs. Lucky you didn't kill him," the

Tentrock foreman said in thinly veiled sarcasm. "As it turned out, it's the best thing that could have happened. The boss threw a bucket of water in his face and brought him to. Then he started askin' questions. Questions Royer didn't have the answers to."

"You didn't get me in here to tell me Jim Sloan's troubles, did you?" Turk asked impatiently. "Let him raise all the hell he wants. The more the better."

"You don't get it, Turk. The man Sloan raised hell with was Royer. It happened after we got back to the layout. On the way in, I mentioned a couple of things that made it look worse for Royer. The boss took him into the office alone. Ten minutes later, Royer skidded out of there on the seat of his pants. I saw the last of it. A man don't take a beatin' like he took and soon forget it."

TURK drew in his breath sharply. "You mean Sloan thought Royer was in on the rustlin'? He whipped Royer, fired him?"

"Fired him," Remington declared, "and told him never to set foot inside Tentrock fence again unless he wanted a gun whippin'."

Turk whistled softly in sheer amazement.

"See now what it means, Turk?" Remington asked. "It's your chance to settle with Jim Sloan."

"By usin' Royer? Hell, he's no friend of mine!"

"Maybe not, but after today he's through with Sloan."

A light of cunning edged into Turk's glance. "Do you reckon we can swing it?" he asked. "I've waited twenty years for this, twenty years to settle things with the man

that named me for a rustler and ran me back into the hills."

The Tentrock foreman smiled thinly. "You ought to forget that story, Turk," he said dryly. "You were rustlin' Sloan's stuff twenty years ago the same as you are now."

A sultry anger came to Turk's face. The truth obviously annoyed him. He could find no ready answer, and in a moment Remington himself was smoothing things over by saying, "Royer knows this country better than any man alive. With his help, we can run off enough stuff to put Sloan on the skids. Then, when the bank takes Tentrock over, you and me step in and buy the layout—"

The ramrod's voice droned on insistently, pausing only to answer an occasional question put by Turk. At the end of a quarter of an hour, Turk, in a better frame of mind, nodded.

"It listens nice, Sid," he agreed. "But what about Royer when we're through with him?"

Remington made a significant gesture, letting his right hand fall to slap the holster at his thigh. Turk's eyes narrowed in hesitation. "That's your job, Sid," he said quickly.

Remington gave a soft laugh and walked over to pick up the black's reins and climb stiffly into the saddle. "You hold up your end of it and I'll take care of mine, Turk," he promised. "The herd will be there tomorrow night. Three hundred head, no guards. With luck, Royer and your crew can have it across the peaks by sunup the mornin' after." He frowned at an inner thought. "How about the sheriff, Turk?"

"He gets a nice enough cut, don't he?" Turk retorted grinning.

"Then get started, Turk." Rem-

ington wheeled the black out into the alley and was gone a moment later.

When Turk took the passageway between the saloon and the adjoining building, he was smiling confidently. Out front, glancing down Hillton's steeply tilted street that ran along the canyon wall, he paused a moment to drag in a deep lungful of the crisp night air before he turned in at the Mile High's swing doors. Then he erased the smile from his face.

Inside business was tailing off for the night. It was past eleven, and Max, the bartender, was momentarily idle over a game of pinochle with a customer at the bar's far end. At a table opposite the short bar three men played a desultory game of stud under the glare of a lamp and a fog of tobacco smoke.

TURK'S glance settled on the sixth and last man in the room. This individual, middling tall and wide of shoulder, stood with elbows on the bar and one boot on the rail, his stance loose and plainly that of a man far gone in drink. His outfit was the ordinary range variety, Levis, spurred boots, blue cotton shirt and open vest. A wide-brimmed gray Stetson was tilted back on his sorrel-thatched head. Face and wrists were burned to a deep brown. His face, lean and aquiline, would have been handsome but for a puffy bruise under his left eye and a sizable swelling along that side of his jaw. The eyes were blue and now red-rimmed and bleary. His face was dark with a couple of days' growth of beard stubble. He wore a weapon in a low-hung holster.

He turned to face the doors as their double hinges groaned at

Turk's entrance. When he saw who it was, a thin smile played across his face and he called, "C'mon, Turk. Have a drink!"

When Turk had come warily across to stand alongside him at the bar, he laughed softly. "Two days ago if a man had told me I'd ever be buyin' a drink for Turk Exin, I'd have pushed his teeth down his throat!" he said.

"Why the change, Royer?" Turk asked in a skeptical tone.

"Why the change?" Phil Royer gave his whiskey-thick laugh again. "Because today Jim Sloan put a name to me no man ever has. He gave me this bad eye and this jaw."

Turk smiled. "Jim Sloan's a big man. You'll learn sooner or later that he don't care who he trumps on. What was it about?"

"About you. Jim claimed I was in on that rustlin' job last night." Phil Royer's glance was direct, his eyes narrow-slitted as though he was having a hard time focusing them.

"Did anyone say I was in on that?" Turk evaded.

Royer turned away from him and pounded on the bar with an empty bottle that had been standing at his elbow. He called for drinks, then turned back to Turk.

"What the hell do I care if you ran off that Tentrock stuff last night, if you've run off all the others Sloan's lost these last two years! Turk, I never saw your side of this argument until today." He poured two drinks from the bottle the bartender slid along the counter and raised his own glass. "Well, here's to Jim Sloan's poor health."

They drank. As Phil Royer sat his glass down, he said, "I'm up here lookin' for a job. Can you give me one?"

Turk shook his head. "I'd sooner

have a 'cat bedded down in my calf corral," he said flatly.

"I mean it, Turk. You hate Jim Sloan's guts, always have. So do I, now. It's all right with me if you can rustle him into the poorhouse. There's nothing I'd like better than to help you do it."

Turk poured himself another drink, cuffed it off. "I'm thinkin' of doin' that very thing," he stated.

Royer's glance sharpened. "The hell you say! When?"

"When I get ready."

"Then take me on. I'll help you do it."

Turk shook his head definitely. "Hunh-uh. I'm playin' it too close to the belt to take a chance like that, Phil."

"To hell with the chance you're takin'," Phil Royer drawled in his whiskey-thick voice. "You need me. F'r instance, I could take every critter in that Tentrock hill pasture through their fence in broad daylight and a man a mile away wouldn't know they were on the move. I could—"

"I've got all the help I need on Tentrock," Turk cut in. "Someone over there lets me know which fence isn't bein' guarded, where the herds are. Between us, we've managed to keep Sloan rememberin' how he pushed me off good grass and back into those hills twenty years ago. Sooner or later I'll even that score."

"Who's your man on Tentrock?" Phil Royer asked bluntly, his glance sharpening.

Turk smiled broadly. "How much did Sloan pay you to come here and ask me that?" He spoke before he thought and saw instantly the quick anger that flared alive in Phil Royer's eyes. Royer pushed back from the bar and let his hands fall to his

sides. Turk went pale at the threat behind that gesture.

"Easy, Phil!" he said hastily. "Reckon I didn't mean that." He saw the tenseness gradually go out of Royer, and over his genuine relief he made the decision that here was a man he could trust. "About that job, Phil. You really want it?"

THE bleakness of a moment ago only faded slowly from Phil Royer's face. "Why the hell would I be here if I didn't?" he demanded savagely.

That settled it with Turk. He insisted on buying another two rounds of drinks, and meanwhile their talk drifted along the channels Sid Remington had earlier outlined. The whiskey sharpened Turk's wits and seemed to dull Phil Royer's. After their first understanding, that he was hired and would ride with Turk's crew, Royer lost interest in everything but the bottle.

As he took his second drink, his knees buckled a little and he swayed heavily against the bar.

Turk noticed and said "Better go easy on the fire water, Phil. We have a twelve-mile ride ahead of us tonight."

Royer shook his head. "Not me. I'll be out in the mornin'. I got a bed all picked out in the stable loft. Have 'nother drink on me, Turk."

Turk's hand reached the bottle before Royer's. "Let's call it quits, Phil. If you're workin' tomorrow, you can't be ridin' off a hang-over."

Royer shrugged indifferently, pushed out from the bar and would have fallen if Turk's hand hadn't steadied him. They left the Mile High that way, Royer's arm about Turk's shoulders and most of his weight against the other man. Turk was patient on the way to the feed

barn, and twice he had to talk Royer out of going back to the saloon. Finally, after boosting him up the ladder into the loft, Turk saw his new crew man safely bedded down in the hay. In less than five minutes Royer was snoring. Turk left.

Phil Royer listened until Turk's solid boot tread had faded out into the stillness down the street. Then he sat up and shook his head to clear it, for the four drinks he'd taken with Turk had left him a little groggy. He unbuttoned his shirt and took out a flat large-necked canteen. This canteen and the spittoon at the Mile High's bar contained most of the whiskey from the quart bottle he'd pretended to empty down his throat this afternoon and tonight. He corked the canteen and buried it in the hay and then soundlessly clinched back down the loft ladder, a comparatively sober man.

Five minutes later he had sneaked his saddle off the pole at the rear of the barn and his sorrel horse from the corral out behind, moving so quietly that the snores of the hostler, asleep in his office in front, continued unbroken.

Once out of sight of Hillton's few remaining lights, Phil lifted the sorrel to a quick canter and followed the trail that led down out of the canyon. An hour's steady going put him well out onto the flats through Tentrock's fence, and as he rode up a sparsely wooded slope toward the line shack where he had this morning been found lying unconscious, he made out Jim Sloan's bulky shape in the shadow of the low hanging eaves.

Phil reined in alongside the rancher, noticing at once the set, bleak expression on the man's face. "The word got there, Jim," he said. "Turk's talked to me. I'm his right

bower now. It looks like it worked."

Jim Sloan seemed strangely unmoved by this news. He spoke slowly. "Phil, I've had my eye on every man at the layout since I kicked you out this noon. The only one who could have carried the word to Turk was Sid Remington."

"Then my guess was right?"

The rancher let out a weary sigh. "Looks like it, although I'll need more proof than this. Sid left at five tonight, sayin' he was on his way to town to see a girl. It's a hell of a thing to believe of a man that's turned in the work for me Sid has."

"But it's starin' you in the face, boss."

"I know, I know," Sloan said impatiently. "When does it happen, Phil? Is it like you said it would be? Did Turk make you the proposition to help drive off my herds?"

Phil nodded. "Tomorrow night. He seemed pretty sure there'd be three or four hundred head in the hill pasture. He seemed to think they wouldn't be under guard."

"The crew'll be there tomorrow night, not the herd," Jim Sloan said ominously. As an afterthought, he added, "Sorry I hit you so hard that last time this mornin'. But Sid was watchin'. I had to make it look real."

Phil's hand went to his swollen jaw and he grinned wryly. "It sure hurt then. But I'd do it again if it opened your eyes to who's helpin' Turk."

Their talk drifted on for another five minutes, Jim Sloan's mood blunt and ominous in comparison to his usual good humor. Soon they put their ponies down the slope of the hill away from the shack. A mile further on they parted, Sloan

riding toward Tentrock's headquarters and Phil striking in toward the hills.

A lone light in Tentrock's bunkhouse was pinpointing the night's distance when Sid Remington happened to remember that he'd this morning left his briar pipe in the line shack where they had found Phil Royer. He glanced upward at the wheeling stars and judged the time to be close to midnight. Since he was wide awake and hungry for a lung-satisfying smoke to take the place of the cigarettes he'd used all day, he decided to take the swing north and get the pipe before he turned in.

Three-quarters of an hour later, he saw the two riders coming down along the slope from the shack. He was barely in time to rein behind a screening of scrub cedar and keep from being discovered. Dropping out of the saddle, he clamped one hand over his black's nostrils to keep the animal from whickering and giving away his presence.

Phil Royer and Jim Sloan rode by less than forty feet out from the cedars. Recognizing them, Remington had a moment or two of sheer panic. Finally, when they had ridden out of hearing, his pulse settled back to its normal beat and he spent a long quarter hour reshaping his plans. Then, knowing what he must do, he sloped into the saddle again and headed back into the hills, with Turk Exin's layout as his destination.

THE sun's red-orange disk was toppling the rolling horizon to the east late the next afternoon as Phil and Turk Exin left the trail that twisted down out of the foothills and rode straight south toward Tentrock's fence.

Turk had been sullen and untalkative in the two hours since Phil had ridden out from Hillton to the Block E. This evening, the rustler appeared nervous over what was happening, keyed up to this one night that was going to give him a revenge he'd waited twenty years to take.

"Better be swingin' west, hadn't we?" Phil said a few minutes later, and started reining his sorrel aside. Turk was riding a few paces behind him.

"We'd better be goin' straight on!"

Turk's voice grated with a harshness that made Phil turn quickly to face him. Turk had a Colt fisted in his hand. It was lined at Phil's chest. Phil pulled in on the reins and then slowly lifted his hands above his head.

In the second's silence that followed, Turk's face took on a down-lipped smile. At length he spoke: "Go ahead, make your play, Royer!"

Wariness made Phil keep his hands where they were, for Turk's .45 was cocked and there was a finger on the trigger. "What's the idea, Turk?" he drawled.

"The idea is that Sid ran onto you and Jim Sloan up at that line shack last night!"

A brief, tense silence followed that. Then Phil drawled, "Well, get it over with, Turk!"

Turk's smile broadened meaningly. He shook his head. "Huh-huh! You're comin' along just in case Sloan shows up." He thrust out his left hand. "I'll take your hardware. Better move slow!"

When he had thrust Phil's six-gun through the waist band of his trousers, he motioned ahead with his .45. "Keep headed the way you were.

We're meetin' the crew along the east fence."

A quarter hour's riding made it all plain to Phil. By that time they had sighted the unshapely, sprawling mass of the herd that was being gathered along Tentrock's east fence. Dusk was coming on fast, yet even in this uncertain light it was plain that the broad east pasture had been gutted of animals that were already working on through a wide gap in the wire, choused by a dozen of Turk's men. He realized grimly that Jim Sloan no longer had a chance. Tentrock's crew was five miles to the west, set for an ambush that would never take place; while here, almost within sight of headquarters, the very lifeblood of the outfit was being drained in one quick thrust that meant complete and utter ruin to Jim Sloan. And there was nothing Phil could do about it, not with Turk's gun hand holding death within its grasp.

Phil's feeling of helplessness was increased when they rode in on the herd and Sid Remington came out to meet them. The Tentrock ramrod stopped twenty feet away, eying Phil smugly.

"Like it, Royer?" he queried with cutting sarcasm.

"If it works, it's good," Phil said.

"It'll work." Remington's glance swiveled to Turk. "Sloane thought he was playing it safe. Had the sheriff out this mornin' and put me under arrest. Our friend took a hundred dollars of my money to let me go on the way in to jail. Let's make this fast, Turk. I'll send across a man to help you watch Royer."

Phil's two guards, Turk and a dour-visaged hombre packing two guns, didn't let him out of their sight as the quick dust faded into

complete darkness broken only by the light of the myriad stars. At times they rode close to him; at others, they lagged behind, yet always close enough to let them see any move he made. The herd worked north and into the hills, and three hours saw it winding its thick stem up the twistings of a high-walled canyon. In all this time, Phil saw Remington only once; yet he constantly heard the man's voice shouting orders from far back in the drag.

That canyon offered Phil his first slim chance. It took him a long time to see it, but in the end he was ready and knew what he must do. The canyon, narrowing as it climbed through the foothills toward the peaks, placed the riders near the animals. Turk and his companion rode with their prisoner at the swing position, closely flanking the two crewmen that worked the herd there.

Twice in five minutes, Phil was so close to a swing rider that his stirrup touched the neighboring pony's flanks. The third time it happened he kicked his off-boot from the stirrup, hunched over and threw his long frame from the saddle in a quick roll.

He was down behind his sorrel before the first gun, Turk's, spoke in an explosion that ripped along the canyon's corridor. He landed on his feet and dove in between the legs of the horse alongside, toward the herd.

THREE lunging steps carried Phil in between two plodding steers. A second shot beat the air and a bullet *plonked* into the steer alongside him. The animal went down with a wild frightened bawl. Hunched over, Phil ran deeper into the herd while other guns spoke and Turk's angry shout summoned Sid Remington.

WS—6E

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Phil was halfway through the herd, side-stepping, dodging the four-foot spread of steers' horns, before the nervous fright brought on by the gunfire hit the animals. By that time the riders were out of sight in the blackness behind. He came erect, and, shoving and fighting his way, finally gained the far margin of the herd.

As he stepped clear, a rider's shape rushed up out of the blackness, calling, "Where's your lug-head? What's goin' on over there?"

Phil saw instantly that he hadn't been recognized. He ran across to the rider, calling, "Get back! They're comin' this way!"

"Who?" the rider shouted, sliding his pony to a stop and bending low in the saddle to catch Phil's answer.

Phil caught him that way, off balance. He struck the man's jaw with all the strength of his big-muscled body behind his knotted fist. The rider's gun fell from his hand and Phil caught it. He wasted several precious seconds in dragging the man's inert body high up into the rocks along the canyon wall. Then, leaping to the saddle, he headed for the point of the herd, thumbing three quick shots into the air to add to the panic of the fear-crazed animals. Half a minute put him within sight of two point riders who were vainly trying to work back against the onrush of the herd. He fell in with them, unrecognized, and ten seconds later brought his six-gun down solidly on the Stetson of the first man. The second saw his blow strike and wheeled and palmed up a gun. Phil's weapon bucked in his hand and his bullet drove the rider out of the saddle before the other's draw was completed.

He reloaded as he reined on ahead of the lead steers. Emptying the

.45 at the leaders, he succeeded in turning one or two of them back. Animals behind milled after these and within a few moments the canyon bottom was filled to brimming with solidly packed steers fighting to put distance between them and that insistently speaking gun up ahead.

Shouts sounded above the hoof thunder far to the rear now, and Phil smiled grimly at the thought of the riders trapped in their swing positions, facing an unyielding mass of animals behind and more pushing at them from the front. He loaded and emptied his gun twice again, making sure that the herd was circling back upon itself. Then a rattle of gunfire far back told him that riders back there were fighting for their lives against the gathering stampede.

He spotted one rider climbing his horse up a break in the wall. He laid his sights on the man and sent two snap shots. The figure in the saddle went down abruptly.

Suddenly, from behind Phil, a six-gun spoke and hot lead laid a concussion of air along his face. He reined wildly aside, turning as his pony lunged. Sid Remington was barely ten feet away, his Colt lining down once again.

PHIL threw himself from the saddle as Remington's second shot burned the flesh along his upper left arm. He lit spraddle-legged, his weapon swinging into line. Instinct timed the smooth play of hand and arm as he thumbed three quick shots at the Tentrock ramrod. Remington lurched awkwardly, came erect again. Phil's next bullet made the ramrod's gaunt frame jerk convulsively. Then Remington was down, hanging onto the reins until his shy-

ing black horse broke them from his grip of death.

Later, Phil climbed his pony up a stretch of sheer-tilted rock and moved out of the way of the herd that once more turned back on itself. This time the animals thundered straight up the canyon in a relentless charge that nothing could have halted. But now there were no riders to stop them, and as the hoof-thunder died into the distance there was no voices, no rattle of gunfire, to break the stillness.

All at once Phil did hear something that kept him where he was, screened by a maze of outcroppings up along the foot of the wall. It was the slurring beat of horses on the move. It grew louder, and in another two minutes a bunch of riders swung into sight below.

Phil lined his sights at the nearest man, ready to cut him down if he was discovered. Then, miraculously, Jim Sloan's voice shouted from out of the group, "Royer!" There was a moment's silence, and then the rancher spoke to the others in a worried tone, "Do you reckon he was trampled like the rest?"

Phil came up out of his crouch. "Herc, Jim!" he called.

THE END.

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

(yes, I did—actually and literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

When he was alongside Sloan a minute afterward, the relief mirrored on the rancher's face was clear and unmistakable.

"We heard the guns and came up here hell for leather, Phil," Sloan explained. "It looked like you were gone with the rest, what's left of 'em." He waved an arm down canyon. "We counted six bodies, one that looked like it might have been Turk. I had Remington arrested, so that's taken care of."

"Remington's lying right over there, Jim," Phil told him.

Jim Sloane looked incredulous until Phil told him about the sheriff. Then the rancher shook his head ominously.

"It won't take us long to put him in his own jail," he declared. Some inner thought relaxed the grim set of his face then, and he looked at Phil. "Tentrock's in the clear now, with her best years ahead," he said almost hesitantly. "I'm a poor hand at thankin' a man, Phil, but would Remington's job suit you?"

"You've bought yourself a new straw boss, Jim," Phil said with a wide grin.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 495-10, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 495-10, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.



SCARECROW IN THE SADDLE

by NORMAN A. FOX

STAMPEDE seemed very peaceful in the bright sunlight; a sleepy cow town locked in the lethargy of mid afternoon. Or so it appeared. But the crowbait stranger on the crow bait horse knew that calm was deceptive, knew it before he had covered half the length of the lanelike street. For just ahead flies buzzed indolently about the yawning door of a livery stable and in that doorway, a darker blotch against the darkness, was a wolf-faced man who

fingered a drawn gun. A murder was in the making.

Something in the gunman's attitude, rather than in his actions, told the stranger what was impending and he dragged his eyes across the street. There a Levis-clad, tow-headed youth, conspicuous in a bright plaid jacket, was loading supplies into a buckboard. The stranger wasted only a split second on his glance. Then he looked toward the livery stable and saw the man in the

doorway leveling the gun.

Afterward the stranger was to wonder why he took cards in the game, but at the moment his action was purely instinctive. His hand winked toward a scarred holster and flame lashed from his fist. Gunfire speared from the livery stable, too, but it angled upward and lead thudded into a false-fronted building. The wolf-faced man lurched into the open, clutching at his gun arm. The youngster by the buckboard jerked like a wired puppet.

As though it had been released from a magician's spell, the town came to life. The stranger, easing from his saddle, saw men spew from doorways to converge on him. And the first to reach him was a rawboned, butter-haired Scandinavian giant with a sheriff's star pinned on his calfskin vest.

"Who ban shootin'?" demanded the lawman.

"Me, mostly," the stranger replied. "The gent with the busted wing was aimin' to dust the younger. I bought in."

That terse explanation would have brought every eye upon him if his appearance hadn't already made him the center of attraction. He wore a gambler's frock coat, cut for a much taller man, faded Levis and scuffed boots with mismatched spurs. All in all, he might have been a fugitive scarecrow. Neutral-colored hair, gray-flecked, peeped from beneath a floppy sombrero that shaded his weather-beaten face. His eyes, brown and big, were sober and thoughtful, yet there was a good-humored quirk to his grin.

"What your name ban, feller?" the sheriff wanted to know. "And where you headin'?"

"Yates, Yonder Yates," the stranger answered and jerked a

thumb. "I come from that way and I'm headin' yonder."

"I t'ank you ban a saddle bum," the sheriff surmised. "I t'ank you ride into towns and make trouble."

"It ain't so!" a new voice interjected and the tow-headed youngster forced his way through the growing crowd to the sheriff. "Dice Duveen is one of Saul Oxley's riders. I told you long ago, Lundquist, that the Ox-bow spread is after my scalp. You figgered I was loco. Now maybe you'll believe me."

Sheriff Nels Lundquist eyed the glowering man with the wounded arm. "What you say for yourself, Duveen? You ban tryin' to kill Cotton Wayne?"

"Aw, I ain't no killer," the gunman growled. "I was just gonna toss a little lead to see that damn nester dance. This Yates gent had me figgered wrong."

Lundquist, obviously at a loss as to how to proceed, scratched his head. "Wayne ain't hurt none so I can't make no arrest," he ruminated aloud. "The other feller didn't savvy yust right." He eyed Yates. "You be travelin', feller. Be out of Stampede by sundown!"

"Maybe I got me some business here," said Yonder Yates.

"Business be damned," the lawman countered stubbornly. "You be movin', feller."

THE sheriff turned on his heel. Dice Duveen, with a sneering glance at Yonder Yates, shuffled away and the crowd broke up and drifted on until only Yonder Yates and Cotton Wayne stood in the street. The youngster thrust out his hand.

"I'm thankin' you," he said. "Come over to the Golden Fan and I'll buy you a drink. That'll cost me two-bits which is just about what

I'm worth in this Whispering River country. It'll sort o' square things."

Yonder Yates looked at the boy, looked down the street after the disappearing Duveen. Something was mighty wrong here. Duveen might have fooled the sheriff, but he hadn't fooled Yonder. There had been murder in the Ox-bow man's face as he stood waiting in that doorway. Yonder Yates knew he had stepped into a game far deeper than surface appearances indicated. His impulse was to refuse Cotton Wayne's half cynical offer and be about his own business. Yet the same instinct that had sent his hand to his gun made him shrug in silent acquiescence.

Together they strode toward the Golden Fan, and the pair of them, shoulder to shoulder, were about of a size, being neither big men nor little men. Inside the dark, cool interior of the saloon they found a table readily enough for the place was practically deserted. When they were seated, Yonder spoke.

"Tain't the first time you've dodged lead?" he ventured.

Cotton Wayne scowled. "Nor the last, so long as my Circle W spread wedges into Saul Oxley's Ox-bow," he said. "But they never actually tried bushwhackin' before. Mostly they've just bedeviled me till I'm about plumb loco. Rifles at long range has spat bullets so close I know they could've dusted me if they'd wanted to. Stock scattered all over hell's half acre. Little things that add up plenty when they drag ou for months."

Yonder nodded, feeling an inward interest that his weather-beaten face did not betray. "This Scandioopian sheriff," he asked, "is he Oxley's man?"

"No," Cotton admitted. "Lundquist is too stubborn to pack any man's brand, I reckon. But Oxley's

cagy. Hereabouts he acts peace-lovin' and pious as a deacon. That's why nobody believes me when I tell 'em he's houndin' me. They think I'm crazier'n a bedbug. Like today. Nobody thinks Duveen was tryin' to gun me except—"

The boy hesitated and Yonder following his stare, saw a tall, hard-faced man pushing through the bat-wings.

"Brock Kruif," Cotton whispered. "He's Saul Oxley's range boss."

Kruif was coming their way. His glance, flicking from table to table, had found them and he strode up unhesitatingly.

"Howdy, Wayne," the man said and ignored Yonder. "Been lookin' for yuh. The boss is willin' to ante that offer he made for yore spread. There's an extra thousand dollars for a pronto answer."

"An extra thousand," Cotton echoed and blood flamed in his face. "Why, you thievin' skunks! Your price still ain't half what the place's worth."

Brock Kruif colored, too. "I ain't here to argue," he said flatly. "Take it or leave it. And if yuh leave it, yuh better get out and keep an eye on the spread. Maybe the gophers'll pack it off some night."

For a long moment the nester and the range boss eyed each other in charged silence. Then Brock Kruif turned away and the bat-wings creaked behind him. Yonder, staring after him with unseeing eyes, was still absorbed in his own thoughts when Cotton Wayne spoke.

"I savvy." The boy spoke tonelessly. "First they do their best to crack my nerve, then an out and out try at murder. Now a last offer to top it off. Oxley's fixin' to raid the place, maybe tonight. I should have took his offer. Maybe it ain't too late. If Kruif's still in town I—"

He kicked his chair away, moved to go. The weight of Yonder's hand restrained him.

"That ain't the way, son," Yonder said earnestly. "Don't let 'em stampede yuh into doin' exactly what they figger yuh'll do."

Cotton studied the older man's weather-beaten face. "Maybe you're right," he conceded at last. "But I'm goin'. I'll feel better when I'm on my place, watchin' things."

"Maybe yuh could tell the sheriff —get yuh some protection."

"It wouldn't work," Cotton said bitterly. "He'd just figger I was airin' loco suspicions again. And supposin' the Ox-bow didn't make a play tonight? I couldn't expect Lundquist to squat on my stoop forever."

"That's right," Yonder agreed. "Reckon the law'll be no help. But if yuh'll wait a minute, I got a note to write to said law."

GRINNING, he shuffled across to the bar, borrowed paper and returned to the table to toil with a pencil stub. His labor completed, he passed the paper to the young nester. It read:

DEAR SHERIFF:

A schoolmarm tolle me that a Scandianvian named Leaf Ericson was the first gent to dab a loon on these here United States.

Maybe that is what makes you squareheads think you own this country and can order other citizens aroun'. Maybe you dont no Leafs brand was vented by George Washington and Abe Linkon and this is free open range for any kind of critter.

I am leving town but not becuz you sed so. My frend Cotton Wane has invited me to his spred where I aim to stay just as long as I darn plesse.

Respekkfully yours,
YONDER YATES.

The humorously worded defiance of the note forced a grin from Cotton, but the boy was sober again when he passed back the paper.

THE FOOTBALL STORY OF THE YEAR



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NOVEMBER
Athlete

15c AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

"Reckon maybe you got a right to try and rile Lundquist, seein' how he treated you," he said. "But you ain't comin' to the Circle W. Won't be healthy out there."

Yonder's brown eyes became sadder. "And I was countin' on a home-cooked supper," he mourned. "Reckon I had it comin'."

Color touched Cotton Wayne's cheeks again. "I didn't savvy," he said. "Come along, old-timer. But when the dishes is done you'll have to ride. This ain't no fight of yours."

They left the saloon, Yonder pausing beneath its wooden awning to give the note to a freckle-faced boy. Then the wanderer tied his crowsbait horse behind Wayne's buckboard and climbed upon the sagging seat beside the nester.

Yonder Yates had thoughts of his own to occupy him, but, with Stampede behind and the road winding across sun-drenched range land, he forgot them in rapt admiration for the country. Grass, hub-high, flanked the road and the prairie stretched away like the swells of an ocean until it merged with hazy distant hills. It was a cattleman's paradise, and Yonder Yates, who had wandered from the brimstone border to the Canadian Rockies, could appreciate it.

Only once did he break silence. "This Oxley galoot?" he asked. "What's he look like?"

"Big and beefy," Cotton replied grimly, "with a face on him like he was an angel."

They reached the Circle W an hour before sundown. The neat little shack nestling in a green coulee won Yonder's immediate approval. Peeled-pole corrals were nearby and the skeleton frame-work of an uncompleted barn reared behind the shack. It was a pleasant place, mute

monument to the young nester's months of toil.

Supper might have been pleasant, too, but dejection weighed heavily on Cotton, making the boy morose and silent during the meal. The shadow of an uncertain menace hung over the Circle W. Before the meal was finished that shadow began to take shape.

The thunder of approaching hoofs brought Yonder to his feet, his ancient gun in his fist. He was half-way to the door when glass showered upon the homemade table as something was hurled through the window. Crouching in the doorway, he saw a rider streaking away through the coulee. When he sheathed his gun, Yonder found Cotton peeling a note from the rock that had broken the window. The boy glanced at the paper, passed it over. Only two words were printed on it: *LAST CHANCE*.

It was enough. Cotton Wayne slumped into the nearest chair, his shoulders hunched. Yonder watched him with brooding eyes. Each knew who had sent that ultimatum and each knew what it meant. There was no need for words.

"You'd better be riding," the youngster said finally. "And maybe I'll go with you." He toyed with the thought in silence, then continued, "We could stop at the Ox-bow long enough to get the dinero them gents is offerin'. After that we'd just mosey on."

"Yuh don't want to follow my trail," Yonder pointed out earnestly. "It leads nowhere. Yuh see a lot of country but yuh end up with coats and britches that don't match and a pair of spurs that ain't even fifth cousins to each other. And once yore heel gets itchin' it never quits. Yuh allus gotta be goin' yonder."

"But I wouldn't stay in the sad-

dle till I got glued there," Cotton argued. "I'd quit soon as I saw a likely piece of range."

"That's what yuh think now," Yonder said flatly. "But once yuh left here, yuh'd allus be lookin' baek. Yuh'd allus be rememberin' that yuh run instead of stickin'. So yuh'd keep on runnin', but it wouldn't do no good. In the end yuh'd finally figger out that yuh was runnin' from yoreself."

BUT fightin' Oxley's like fightin' a shadow." Cotton's voice was desperate. "He come here four-five years ago, they say, an' bought himself a spread. Since then he's been buildin' that spread and buildin' himself in the community.

"Folks just won't believe he's a range hog. If I cuss him in town they eye me like I was tryin' to wear Napoleon's Stetson. I could fight an honest-to-gosh fight but I can't war against a gent that pretends he's the dove o' peace."

Yonder stepped to the open door. The sun was setting, but the riot of color that usually attended that daily miracle was masked by a lightning-shot blue curtain. Distant thunder threatened a storm at the close of the long, hot day. Still, there was beauty to the west and the wanderer drank it in before speaking.

"Little folks like yuh and me allus has to ride the rough string," he said philosophically. "Might say yuh're bustin' yore fust cayuse here in this Whispering River country. Ride him and yuh can ride anything. Give up and yuh'll grab leather the rest of yore life."

Cotton reflected on that in silence, but his eyes were brighter when he looked up. "Maybc you're right," he admitted thoughtfully. "I'll stick, old-timer. But you better be ridin'.

Hell's due to pop hereabouts."

The mutter of thunder was closer now, and a few drops of rain drummed against the roof like phantom fingers. Yonder closed the door.

"No hurry," he said casually. "I got no hankerin' for a wet saddle. Likely trouble won't come 'fore midnight."

Thus the matter was closed for the time being. With the storm breaking in sudden fury, Yonder helped the boy wash the dishes and put them away. They lighted a lamp and in its cheery glow sat and waited. A tiny clock ticked noisily on a nearby shelf and its hands crawled to nine before the rain ceased. At last the thunder grew dim with distance, but Yonder Yates still sat in his chair, though it was nearly ten o'clock.

Chin upon chest, the wanderer appeared to be drowsing. Actually he was covertly studying the nester. He saw the youngster eye him uncertainly open his mouth half a dozen times as though to speak.

"Looks like the rain let up for the night," the youngster observed finally. "I'm thinkin'—"

Some sound borne by the night breeze reached them and Cotton's voice trailed away. First that sound was like an echo of the dying thunder. Then it grew louder and became the rising crescendo of drumming hoofs. The nester came to his feet. He blew out the lamp before he dived for the door to wrench it open. A rain-washed moon topped the eastern hills and its light, like silver mist, etched a score of riders against the night.

"The Ox-bow!" Cotton gasped. "They've come!"

Gun in hand, Yonder scuttled toward one of the shack's two windows. "They'll come a-shootin'," he prophesied.

He was right, for there was no prelude. Indian-fashion the oncoming horsemen spread out to circle the shack at a hard gallop. Rifles and short guns poured a deadly fire that raked through the flimsy walls.

At the other window Cotton's face was a ghostly mask, washed by the filtering moonlight. But his gun hand was steady. Yonder could tell that the boy was scared, but there is a difference between fear and cowardice, and Yonder recognized the difference. He nodded slow approval triggering steadily.

He could shoot, and so could the boy, he discovered. Together they dumped four Ox-bow riders from their saddles. That was encouraging, but it didn't work to their advantage, for it only showed the attackers the folly of their method. At a shouted order from someone, the riders dismounted, took shelter behind corrals and barn frame-work. Flattened thus, they continued to shower the cabin with lead.

Now the fighting was torturous, hard on the nerves of the two men within the cabin. An hour dragged by; an hour of picking at targets as elusive as the shadows that shrouded them. Bullets hummed through the walls and one nicked Yonder, drawing blood from his cheek. Another had slammed into Cotton, creasing his hip.

THEN, as though by truce, the gunfire outside ceased. Yonder Yates wasn't fooled. There was fresh deviltry brewing, but he wasn't exactly sure what to expect. The shack couldn't be fired, he knew, for the passing storm had soaked the wood. Yet the Ox-bow had something up its sleeve and that something boded no good for him and Cotton.

"Wayne?" someone bellowed. "You still on your feet?"

"Saul Oxley," the boy whispered, then raised his voice to shout his defiance.

"I got a dicker to make. Want to listen?" Oxley bawled.

That voice made Yonder's spine tingle. It wasn't hard to visualize the big, beefy man Cotton had described. But Saul Oxley had dropped his peaceful pose this night.

"Speak up," the youngster said cautiously.

"I gave you a warning," Oxley shouted. "You thought I was bluffin', but I ain't. It's this spread I want, not your hide. I've got money and papers out here. Step over and sign up and I'll call off my men. Otherwise I'm drivin' you out, and you don't get a dime. What do you say?"

Yonder saw the hesitancy in Cotton's face and knew Saul Oxley was pulling a whizzer of some sort. No man as high-handed as Oxley would give good money for something that might be his for the taking. It didn't make sense, yet Yonder's advice was contrary to his conviction.

"Tell him it's a deal," he whispered.

Surprise twisted Cotton Wayne's face. "You mean you want me to give in?" the boy demanded. "After the things you said? Hell, man, I'm here because you talked me into stayin'."

"Go ahead," Yonder Yates snapped in desperate urgency. "It's part of a play—our play."

The youngster gave him another swift, troubled look. Then: "I'm comin' out," he shouted.

That was all Yonder needed. One lunging stride brought him to Cotton's side. A gun barrel arced in the moonlight. Yonder didn't strike the youngster hard, but he struck

him hard enough. Peeling the plaid jacket from the stunned boy, Yonder snatched Cotton's neat sombrero to replace his own floppy one.

He lost little time in the exchange. With sombrero pulled low, he was out of the door and crossing the moon-bathed yard with rapid strides. And, stalking forward, he had the sensation of marching to doom. There were only shadows ahead, but Saul Oxley, beefy and cherubic-faced, came from them, flanked by tall Brock Kruif and Dice Duveen, still sullen-faced. And Saul Oxley's first words told Yonder that he had fooled the Ox-bow men.

"Where's that saddle bum?" Oxley demanded.

"Dead," Yonder muttered.

"That's fine," said Saul Oxley. "We'll have to cart his carcass away so's it'll look like you was alone. Tomorrow that slow-wit sheriff can take care of a suicide case. He thinks you're loco anyway so he won't be surprised that you had a spell, shot your own shack full of holes, then killed yourself. You see, younker, we got you out here to shoot you close up! Grab him, boys!"

That was the moment when Yonder chose to knock the sombrero aside. The moonlight touched his gray-fringed hair. Saul Oxley, his eyes wide, recoiled in astonishment.

"Yeah, it's me," Yonder said with quiet emphasis. "Didn't this Duveen galoot tell yuh my name? I heard yuh'd settled hereabouts after finally gettin' chased out of the Marias country. Recognized yuh before I saw yuh, even if yuh're using a different name. I knew yuh by yore system. First yuh bedevil a hombre, then yuh try bushwhackin', an' if that doesn't work, yuh give 'im a last chance to sell out. The raid was bound to be next, just like

it would've been for me if I hadn't let yuh chase me off my little place fifteen years ago. Grab yore gun, Saul!"

Yonder was going for his own gun. He had planned a different showdown, only to have his hole card fail him. Now he would die beneath Ox-bow fire. But one thought was grim and satisfying. This was better than meeting death in the shack. He might get Oxley first.

And Saul Oxley was the first to die. The big man pitched forward, a bullet in his heart. Before his lifeless body landed on the ground, Yonder was swapping lead with Brock Kruif and Dice Duveen. These men were new satellites of his ancient enemy, and Yonder Yates had never seen them before this day. But they were cut from the same cloth as their

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range-hogging leader and Yonder knew no regret when Dice Duveen pivoted, sprawled. Lead hurled Yonder to the ground, too, but he continued to shoot. He saw Brock Kruif double at the middle, take three hesitant steps and drop.

SUDDENLY Yonder woke to the fact that Cotton was at his side. There the youngster knelt, triggering into darkness that was becoming dotted with gun flame. And Yonder Yates was despairingly certain that the game was up. He had gunned the kingpins of the Ox-bow, but the remaining riders were charging forward in a deadly ring. Leaderless, their attack lacked fervor, but it would accomplish its purpose if only by very force of numbers.

Then a horseman broke from the shadows, firing as he came. And before the fury of that lone rider the Ox-bow men broke in wild rout. It was unbelievable and it was magnificent. But Yonder Yates understood. It wasn't the man alone who was putting the raiders to flight. Rather it was the law that the man represented, for the rider was Sheriff Nels Lundquist.

The lawman swung from his saddle to stride toward the two and Yonder grinned in greeting.

"I thought you was never goin' to show up, sheriff," he said. "But you shore finished the chores. Seanchooivians is fust-class fightin' men when they get riled. I knew you'd

get madder 'n' madder till you finally loped after me."

Lundquist stared. "You yust sent that note figgerin' I'd come out here, feller?"

"Shore," said Yonder, rising from the ground. "Knowin' Oxley's ways, I knew there'd be a raid. If I'd told you so, you'd figgered I was loco, too. So I had to get you out here where you could see that two-faced gent at work."

"Yumpin' Yiminy!" gasped the sheriff.

But Yonder was already heading for the bullet-raked cabin. When he returned, his long coat on, Cotton Wayne was clamoring at his elbow.

"I heard what you said to Oxley, 'fore the fireworks started," the youngster said. "I didn't savvy—didn't know you was in my boots once. But you shore fixed it so's I can stay here—and I'm hopin' you'll stay, too."

Yonder Yates shook his head and moonlight glinted in his mournful eyes. "It's too late, younker," he said. "I shouldn't have run in the fust place. Now I'll be goin' to Stampede to get patched up. After that I reckon I'll be ridin'—yonder."

The wide sweep of his arm took in a corner of Montana, the Idaho panhandle and a slice of Alberta. He limped toward the corral, but, in the saddle, he paused to wave farewell, a crowbait man on a crowbait horse. Then the darkness swallowed his lonely figure.

THE END





Guns and Gunnery

By PHIL SHARPE

THIS week's department is devoted to the firearms enthusiast who desires to learn the mystic meaning of some of the ballistic terms so freely used by arms and ammunition manufacturers, gun bugs, and experts.

In the first place comes the term "muzzle velocity." It may be a surprise to many, but there is no known system of accurately measuring muzzle velocity. Velocities as published in the ammunition catalogues are not *muzzle* but *estimated muzzle*.

The instrument for measuring velocity is known as a chronograph. It measures time of flight of the bullet between two given points. In the high-power rifles we read notes "instrumental velocity at 78 feet." This is obtained by using two electric circuits. One runs through a very fine wire stretched three feet in front of the muzzle so that the blast of gas and air preceding the bullet cannot break the wire. The bullet cuts the wire, breaking an

electrical contact and causing a smoked rod of a given weight to drop from a magnet into a deep pocket in the bench.

One hundred and fifty feet from the muzzle wire is the back stop or disjunctor circuit. When the bullet strikes this, it causes a small pendulum to bob, thus breaking another circuit. This releases a short rod on a chronograph which falls on a trigger mechanism causing a dull knife to fly out and make a small knick in the sooty surface of the falling rod. This rod has a zero mark on it and by means of special micrometers the exact distance between the zero mark and the nicked mark is noted.

Since the rod falls at a constant speed, it is known what fraction of a second was required for the bullet to travel between the two points.

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By means of a chart mounted in front of the operator this is quickly translated into velocity in feet-per-second. This instrumental reading is the average velocity, of course, and therefore is taken at the half-way point on the 150-foot range, plus 3 feet distance to the muzzle wire. Hence, that mystic term "instrumental at 78 feet."

Another more or less puzzling term is that of "breech pressure."

Breech pressure is measured in a pressure gun. This consists of a special heavy barrel chambered for the cartridge in question and having a hole drilled through the top of the barrel over the chamber. It is not necessary to drill a hole in the brass case.

A carefully fitted piston is placed in this hole and on top of it is placed a crusher cylinder of highly refined pure copper or lead. Different sizes are used depending upon the pressures to be taken.

A screw-type anvil is then carefully tightened on the crusher cylinder to eliminate all play. A shot is fired in the conventional fashion with the pressure gun mounted in a machine rest. Velocities can also be taken at the same time. The pressure blows a small round hole through the brass cartridge case driving the piston upward against the crusher cylinder and anvil. This cylinder is squatted out and shortened by the blow. It is then measured to a thousandth of an inch by means of predetermined tables in

front of the operator and translated into pounds per square inch pressure. That's all there is to it.

Another mystic term listed in ammunition catalogues is that of "trajectory." This is really quite simple in final analysis.

A bullet or any other missile discharged from a gun begins to fall immediately upon leaving the muzzle. Assuming a bullet to be shot in a perfectly level plane with the axis of the bore parallel to the surface of the earth, it would strike the ground in exactly the same time as would a bullet dropped by hand from the muzzle of the gun, all other conditions being equal. The higher the velocity, assuring equal wind resistance, the farther the bullet will travel before it strikes the ground, but the time element is constant.

The line of sights on any gun is not parallel to the axis or center of the barrel. The rear sight is slightly higher. This depresses the breech end of the gun somewhat, causing the bullet to rise slightly in the form of an arc, falling into the line of sights at a given point. Trajectory merely means the highest point above this line of sight that a bullet passes.

Assume you have a rifle sighted exactly perfect for one hundred yards. Trajectory is listed at the mid-range point. If your catalogue data for one hundred yards lists the mid-range trajectory as one inch, it merely means that the bullet would strike one inch high at fifty yards.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns And Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

THE fascinating gold country of southern Arizona is Roger B.'s conception of a good fall and winter prospecting field. We agree with him—particularly when he mentions Yuma County, and the cliffy, rugged Kofa Mountains where the North Star Mine was discovered by Felix Mayhew and sold a year later for three hundred and fifty thousand dollars to owners who took more than a million dollars' worth of gold out of the rich vein.

"Yuma County, Arizona, is the target I am aiming for on my next prospecting trip this fall," Roger wrote us. Then he hedged a bit. "That is, if you give the go-ahead signal and all the information you can on the Kofa Mountain district that lies off in the middle of the county. Am just twenty-six years old, but have already worked several years in gold mines in Nevada County, California, and also in the

southern part of that State. Have always been interested in mining and prospecting, especially gold-lode prospecting. Can handle both air and hand drills and am a pretty fair powder man."

Tackling the Kofa Mountains is getting into back country, arid, desert country, Roger, but Yuma County itself is one of richly mineralized sections of Arizona. Ranks fourth in the gold-producing counties of the State with a total production of thirteen or fourteen million dollars' worth of gold bullion, most of it coming from hard-rock mines, although even the less important placer production has aggregated well into the millions.

Unimproved, or only semi-improved, roads and tracks passable for cars lead into the district from Wellton east of Yuma on United States Highway 80. Or down from Quartzite on Highway 70, which crosses the Colorado River at Blythe.

The mountains themselves are a great rock mass, reaching about four thousand feet above sea level, and lifting their crest some twenty-five hundred feet sheer above the surrounding desert floor—a huge rock island thrusting up from an almost interminable sea of sand. Part of the range top is a sort of sloping mesa, dipping generally toward the north, but cut in many places by deep, narrow canyon systems. It's difficult terrain to prospect thoroughly, and for that very reason a country that still affords the persevering prospector a chance to knock himself off another bonanza vein similar to those that have already been discovered and worked.

As a matter of fact, it wasn't until ten years after the discovery of the three-and-a-half-million-dollar King of Arizona Mine at the foot

of a blocky spur along the southern edge of the mountains that Mayhew found his rich North Star vein. *And he found it less than two miles north of the original bonanza*, right at the foot of the clifflike southern wall of the main mountain mass.

Those cliffs are hard to conquer, the mountains themselves difficult to penetrate, but the prospector who gets in and stays in long enough to examine the rocks thoroughly for ore-bearing outcrops may do himself some good before he is through.

Incidentally the surface ore of the North Star Mine—grass-root stuff they call it in Nevada County, California, only there isn't any grass at the foot of the Kofas—was beautiful high-grade. One ore shoot along the foot wall reportedly ran from six to twenty dollars *a pound of rock*. That's figured at the old twenty-dollar-an-ounce price of gold, too. From the owner's viewpoint the trouble with that shoot was it was too rich. A pound of heavy, gold-laden quartz rock is not a very big lump, you know, and thousands of dollars' worth of the bonanza stuff were estimated lost by light-fingered, gold-filching high-graders.

Such bonanza stuff, however, didn't continue with increasing depth. That could hardly be expected. The gold content thinned rapidly. But nevertheless the enriched shoots produced well over a million in yellow metal, not counting the high-grade stuff that was filched.

The original King of Arizona

opened up as a surface-rich bonanza discovery, too. It ran about ten years, handling a two-hundred-ton-per-day production. Some of the ore averaged eight hundred dollars a ton in gold value, other big sections of the quartz vein averaging around two hundred dollars a ton. It was from ore of this nature that the bulk of the mine's three-and-a-half-million-dollar production was derived.

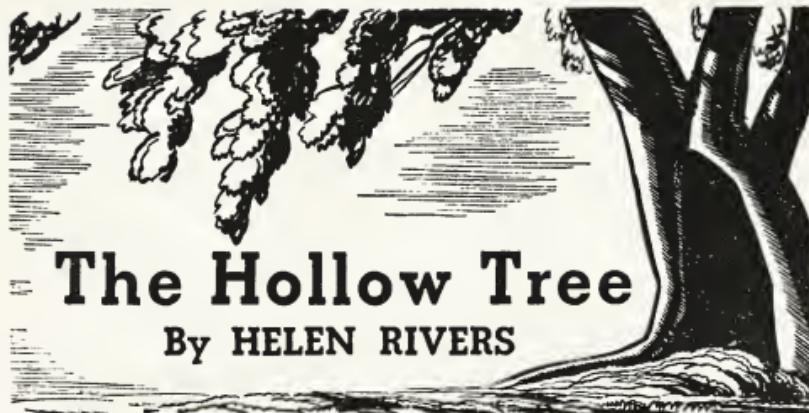
In other words Roger, the Kofa Mountains are a gamble, but a gamble for mighty high stakes if a prospector clicks and should happen to bring in another King of Arizona or North Star vein.

Bonanza ore may not be too frequent these days, but it can still be found. And is found. To assure B. T. P., of Louisville, Kentucky, on this point we would like to bring up briefly J. Collier and Art Coleman, two grand prospectors. Why? Because reports have it they recently came through with one of the richest strikes made in Nevada during the past few years. Ore that assays six thousand dollars a ton, *and up*. The find was on the outcrop surface of a vein about two miles from Gold Butte, down in southern Nevada.

To K. L. T., Topeka, Kansas:
Cost of provisions for a prospector camping in the West runs, roughly, fifty cents a day. But some of the boys when temporarily short of funds can get along on half of that.

• We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

It is no trouble at all for a city dweller to find some means of entertainment. A good-sized city, in fact, offers so many diversions that it's mostly a question of "where to go first"—and the word "where" plays an all-important part in their lives. Not so folks in small towns like Mrs. King, whose letter appears below. She relies on her own self for diversion and asks for nothing more than letters and lots of them. And because we admire such self-sufficiency, we want you all to sit right down and drop her a line. She writes:

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here is my plea for letters and more of them. I live at the Little Meadow Ranch station just below the Pines. My husband pumps water for the town of Goldstrand and the mine there. I have three kiddies, a boy fifteen, girl two and a boy two months old. My husband loves to trap, so I hope some of you trappers will write, too. We have to stay close to the station, so reading and piecing quilts are my main pastimes, as well as letter writing. I love to receive letters and will answer everyone.—Mrs. W. H. King, Oatman Star Route, Kingman, Arizona

Edward wants to exchange things—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old and would like to hear from boys and girls all over the globe. I am interested in racing, cycling, swimming, traveling, and exchanging magazines, papers, stamps, and scenic post cards. Here's hoping I got heaps of replies which I will answer promptly.—Edward Moore, 17 Glen Street, Milson's Point, Sydney, Australia

Don't disappoint this junior member of the Tree—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am fourteen years old and would like to correspond with boys and girls from far and

WS—7E

near between the ages of twelve and seventeen. I like all sports, especially tennis and swimming, and I enjoy writing letters. I'll be waiting to hear from you, so don't disappoint me.—Katherine Kohler, Box 815, Maricopa, California

Cowboys and cowgirls intrigue Cyril—

Dear Miss Rivers:

If you can spare me a little space, I'd like you to print my plea for Pen Pals. I'm a British sailor, eighteen years old, in the wireless telegraphy branch of the navy, and I'd like to hear from Pen Pals from all over the globe, especially the Western cowboys and cowgirls about whom I hear such colorful tales.—Cyril Partott, JX 158441, Telegraphist, c/o 43 Raynald Road, Sheffield 2, England

June will send a souvenir to the first two who answer—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Here is a young eighteen-year-old girl who would like Pen Pals from everywhere. The first two who write will receive a souvenir from Kirkland, so come on, boys and girls, and sling some ink this way. My hobbies are roller skating and collecting snapshots.—June Greene, Box 753, Kirkland, Washington

Compare sporting notes with Jack—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a regular reader of the Hollow Tree, but so far I haven't noticed any Pen Pals whose tastes, hobbies, et cetera, are the same as mine, so would you please insert this plea in your column? I would like to hear from anyone in any part of America who is interested in swing music, soccer or cycling, and who would tell me something of your American sports such as football, baseball and ice hockey. Hoping to hear from someone soon.—Jack Crichton, 113 Seafield, Rathgar, West Lothian, Scotland

Mildred likes to write—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a girl of seventeen and would like to hear from boys and girls all over the world. I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots.

My hobbies are writing letters and short stories and my favorite sport is swimming. Hurry and answer this plea, pals!—Mildred Taylor, Oglethorpe, Georgia

Send Robert some pictures—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please try to get me some Pen Pals. I work nights and during the daytime I have lots of time to write letters. I am eighteen years old and interested in all sports. My hobbies are collecting stamps and pictures from all over the world.—Robert Busam, 1020 Altgeld Street, Chicago, Illinois

From Maine comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Will you please publish my plea? I am very lonely and would like to hear from Pen Pals anywhere from twenty years of age up. My hobby is collecting friends, and I will answer all letters promptly, so please write to me soon.—Gertrude Hurd, 431 Washington Street, Bath, Maine

Everett can tell you what the world's all about—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a sailor in the United States navy, and a very lonely one at that. I'm awfully anxious to get some Pen Pals, and I'm hoping that you'll be able to help. I've been around the world twice, so I've got plenty to tell anyone who is interested. I also have lots of snapshots taken in different States and countries which I'm more than willing to exchange with any correspondents. Due to the fact that my home is in Houston, Texas, and my father is a cattleman, my favorite sport is horseback riding. I am twenty-two years old and my rate in the navy is electrician mate 2nd class. Come on, all you fellas and gals, and write to a land-starved sailor—you have my personal guarantee of an immediate answer.—Everett Miles Fawler, U. S. S. *Phoenix*, c/o Postmaster, Long Beach, California

And here's a housewife with time for outside activities—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a loneome housewife twenty years old and would like to hear from female Pen Pals. I have lived in eight different States and can tell you some interesting things about them. I enjoy dancing, singing, fishing, hiking and doing embroidery work. I would like to exchange songs, patterns and snapshots with anyone from anywhere.—Mrs. L. L. Hahn, c/o Jim Pegram, Jericho Route, Clarendon, Texas

Evelyn is a talented miss—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am seventeen years old, would like to correspond with anyone, anywhere and promise to answer with prompt, interesting letters. I would especially like to hear from those interested in art—drawing, painting and commercial art—and would enjoy exchanging sketches. My other interests are dancing, music, including swing music, reading, writing letters, short stories and poems, and all sports. Write and tell me about your hobbies.—Evelyn Fulcher, Route No. 2, Monroe, Washington

Vivian will write interesting letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-six years old and would like to hear from boys and girls around my age wherever they may be. I promise to answer all letters and will do my best to make mine interesting, so come on, boys and girls, and fill my mailbox.—Vivian Nickerson, Deerfield, Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia, Canada

Don't let Bill down—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am nineteen years old and would like to correspond with girls and boys from all over the world. I enjoy all outdoor sports, but my favorite is swimming. My hobby is photography, and I will exchange snaps with all who write, so come on, all you Pen Pals, don't let me down. I promise to answer all letters.—Bill Bennett, Box No. 9, Baxter Avenue Station, Louisville, Kentucky

Ernest wants to hear from points north, south, east and west—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty-one years old and would like to write to boys and girls my age from any part of the world. I will exchange post cards and snaps. Here's hoping you can help me.—Ernest Napier, 134 Whitewell Road, Whitehouse, Belfast, Northern Ireland

Marion has high aspirations—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am eighteen years old and would like lots of Pen Pals. I play the piano, harmonica, draw, sing and write poems and stories. I have two ambitions, one is to found a Marion Lee school in Alexandria, New Hampshire, and the other is to learn how to blow smoke rings. I will exchange photographs and stamps. Come on, all you jitterbugs and ink slingers, write to this New Hampshire girl who is a long way from home.—Marion Carrie Emery, 176 Court Street, Plymouth, Massachusetts

Reginald will send you pictures of South Africa—

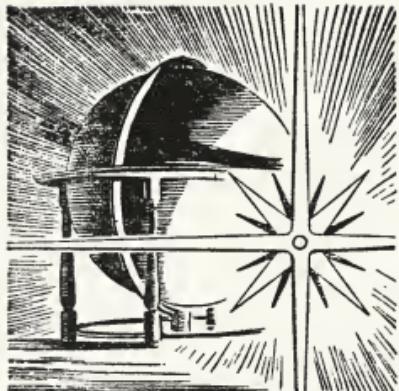
Dear Miss Rivers:

I am nineteen years old and would like to hear from Pen Pals from all parts of the world. I will gladly exchange photos and snapshots with any of those interested in South Africa. I assure you that all letters received by me will be answered without delay.—Reginald Carter, Hatfield Street, Cape Town, South Africa

This middle-aged pal has lots of hobbies—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a middle-aged country woman whose hobby is writing and receiving letters, and I would like some Pen Pals. Another hobby is collecting cactus plants, of which I have several varieties. I also have a nice collection of petrified wood and shells that look thousands of years old, and some curious rocks, pebbles and Indian arrows. I also like to raise chickens and enjoy gardening. I will answer those letters first which contain a stamp.—Mrs. Carrie Hull, Rt. No. 4, Cisco, Texas



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

THERE is something about Colorado, the Silver State, with its mountains and its farming districts, that seems to hold a strong attraction for everybody. John Harrow, of Abilene, Texas, wants to know about the Arkansas River Valley, in that part of Colorado which is devoted to farming. He wants to know something about the types of crops they raise there, how they farm, land prices, and other information needed by the prospective settler.

Well, John, the Arkansas Valley is a mighty fine and rich farming district, and prosperity has settled down there to make its home. All of which is due, among other things,

to the fine supply of water they have for irrigation purposes.

Prowers County, in which the main town is Holly, is the center of perhaps the most productive district in the Valley. The Amity Canal brings water to the farms from storage reservoirs which are kept filled from the river some distance to the westward.

Here in this section you will find some specialty farms, devoted exclusively to one big crop, such as wheat, of which fifty or sixty bushels an acre is sometimes produced, or alfalfa, from which farmers often cut as much as four tons of hay a season, or sugar beets, which always find a market at a good price. However, for the man who has not done this kind of farming and who cannot afford to gamble everything on one crop, the safest and soundest way to start is to vary his crops and not put all his eggs into one basket.

For instance, in planning operations on a farm in that district, the wise farmer should make a layout of his land, plan certain crops with which he is familiar, and then check on the ability of those crops to furnish him such money as he needs—and what is more important—when he needs it. The failure to plan the time element in cash income has probably caused more trouble for farmers than any other one problem.

According to the locale, the possible marketing of the crops that can be raised there, and the season during which cash income can be secured, any farmer can make his plans so that there will be a continuous stream of money coming in,

Fall and winter campers will want to get John North's camp cooking recipes, his directions for outfitting for a camping trip, and his directions for building a log cabin. These may be had free by writing for them, inclosing stamped, self-addressed envelope.

no matter how small. And this regular income is of supreme importance.

So, bearing in mind the importance of ready money, and then investigating the possible sources of it in the Arkansas River Valley, a sound plan can be worked out which will give safety to the farmer.

Taking the staple feeds which grow well in the valley, we know that hay and grain can be had in abundance and that they can be sold in season. But—and here is where some farmers who haven't planned their cash budget properly get into trouble—it is not always wise to sell feed. Feed that can be stored by the grower until after the low prices which follow the harvest have risen can sometimes bring as much as twice the price it brings just at harvest time.

But still more important, it can be made to bring still more if the farmer is not short of cash so that he has to sell his hay and grain. What agricultural economists have been trying to convince people of is the advisability of keeping their grain and hay and feeding it to their own animals. By selling only the finished product, they get not only the first profit, but also the profit that the professional feeder would have got by buying and feeding the fodder to his stock.

Harry W., of Duluth, Minnesota, wants to go to Colorado, too, but for a different purpose. He has some fishing tackle that needs exer-

cising and wants to know something about the fall fishing around Colorado Springs.

To answer the most important question first, the trout season is open until the first of November, and the late fall fishing is ideal.

Colorado Springs is the jumping-off place to thousands of miles of trout streams and lakes, which are kept restocked at all times, thus insuring plenty of fish. The early fall days are the kind a vacationist likes, the daytime being bright, sunny and warm and the nights refreshingly cool.

As to getting around to these thousands of fishing and camping spots, the more public ones are of course accessible by car over paved roads. Colorado Springs, being at the base of Pike's Peak, which is visited by thousands every year, has a network of modern highways leading from it.

The fisherman is also very often a hunter during the closed season on fish, and sportsmen who go into this district in the fall should also take their guns along.

During the last of the trout season there is a month of open shooting on ducks and other migratory birds. Grouse and prairie chicken also have an open season about this time, and there is a short deer season in October as well. Any outdoorsman ought to get plenty of whatever he wants during this period, which in so many ways is the ideal time to plan a camping trip in the Rockies.

• We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



PART THREE

IRON MALEMUTE
By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

The Story So Far:

Stricken with a serious illness just when he is contemplating the biggest venture of his life, the construction of a railroad in Alaska to Poor Man's Hell, a region rich in minerals but hopelessly isolated, eighty-year-old Gid Riley looks around for a man whom he can trust to carry through the job and selects Cal Jessup.

Cal, with a construction crew, sets sail on the *Narada* to establish a townsite on Warm Creek. He is beaten there by Gid's rival, Tuck Gorst, who, with his men, occupies Warm Creek. Having lost the townsite he had wanted, Cal settles his crew at Cold Creek across the Inlet and starts building. When Gorst sees Cal apparently accepting the situation, he and his men give up the Warm Creek site. Whereupon Cal prepares to skid his newly built town across the frozen Inlet.

CHAPTER X

A CONTRACT FULL OF TEETH

CAL JESSUP had quietly made complete plans to shift the new railroad town across the Inlet the moment Gorst and his men left Warm Creek. To make good the bluff that he intended to construct the road on the north side of the Inlet, Cal had spent considerable money in driving piles for the supposed wharf, grade stakes, and building foundations. This he could afford to lose. The buildings themselves had been constructed high enough for men to work under them and place the necessary skids for a quick and inexpensive removal.

Every horse in camp was sharp shod, to permit hard pulling on the ice without slipping. The smaller buildings were moved onto the ice first, and men soon discovered that if they exerted a constant pressure they could keep the structures sliding without the horses. Accordingly, the horses dragged the buildings to the ice, then the men pushed them to the opposite shore.

Before the first day's work ended

there was a group of small buildings piled up at the mouth of Warm Creek. Next the heavier buildings were moved with both teams and men. At last the great day arrived when all of the horses and most of the men massed themselves about the Blue Moon. Creaking and groaning, the building skidded to the ice. It was an all-day job crossing the Inlet, and it required house-mover's equipment to drag the building from the ice to the site selected in Warm Creek, which was to be the new camp's official name.

As soon as the work of relocating the shifted buildings was completed, Cal chartered a canoe manned by natives to take him to the nearest United States commissioner's office.

"I'm here to duly record the new town of Warm Creek," he announced. "Located at the mouth of Warm Creek, on Glacier Inlet."

"I wish you fellows would make up your minds about that town," the commissioner said testily. "A man named Gorst started a town there, then came around and withdrew his entries. I got the impression he and his men wanted to save their location rights to use some other place. Maybe somewhere along the north side of the Inlet to block Riley's railroad."

"I think you're right," said Cal. "And he's doomed to disappointment, because I'm Gid Riley's legal representative and we've settled on the south side."

"I'll send a man over there to act as commissioner," the official said. "And you'll want a deputy marshal, too. There's bound to be trouble when you have a big construction bunch at work. Railroad builders are tough men. I'll have the marshal send John Law over there."

John Law was the frontier term

for law and order. "What'll his name be?" Cal asked.

"John Law. That's his name. He's a youngish, red-headed cuss who's made quite a record for himself. He'd like to get his teeth into something real tough and I think Warm Creek will be it."

"Send him along," Cal said heartily. "We're going to try and keep things orderly, but, as you say, trouble's likely to bust loose any time."

Cal put a number of letters aboard the first southbound steamer, then started back to the camp. The cold spell continued, and as soon as the canoe encountered fresh water, the crew had trouble with ice. They ended up by landing, caching the canoe and walking the remainder of the way over the ice.

Nathan Land and Caboose Riley had moved into the cabin Cal had set aside for himself. They were asleep when he came in, but immediately awakened. Caboose was worried.

"A miner who came in for supplies found Herb Wise's body," he told Cal. "He'd been shot twice in front, and once in the back. I know what you're thinking, Cal—that I did it."

"I'm ready to take your word," Cal said soberly. "But I'm afraid someone else may think you did it."

"Nobody knows I had a brush with Wise except you two," Caboose argued. "Damn it, Cal, I only fired when he was facing me. When he shifted his position, I couldn't get a glimpse of him, or I might've shot again. And that would have been the only time I could possibly have shot him in the back. I'm worried."

"If you didn't shoot him, there's nothing to worry about," Cal de-

clared. "That is, not much," he added.

"But suppose one of Gorst's men saw the fight?" said Caboose. "And suppose, for some reason of his own, he killed Wise. He might turn suspicion my way to clear himself. I'm afraid I'll wake up some morning and find a complete murder case against me."

"Where's the body?" asked Cal.

"They turned a cabin into a morgue and put it there," Caboose answered. "Some of the boys said we'd probably have plenty of use for a morgue sooner or later, anyway. They fixed it up with tables to hold the remains, and windows to let the cold in. Wise's body is frozen solid."

"I'll have a look," Cal said. "In the meantime keep your mouth shut and try to remember every incident of your brush with Wise. If someone tries to frame you, then we'll be prepared with a self-defense plea."

NATHON LAND had been far from idle during Cal's absence. He had laid out a wharf capable of handling three steamers at a time, if necessary. Railroad yards adjoined the wharf, and cars, receiving their load from ship's tackle, could either be hauled up the main line or stored on sidings. Nathan planned warehouse space on the wharf sufficient to care for the cargoes of two small steamers. There would be other space nearby to protect any overflow freight from wind and weather.

A small crew was running lines and setting grade stakes along the Inlet, while Hurley and several hard-rock men had been sent to the one place on the line where they would have to tunnel. Hurley was to get things organized for winter drilling. This meant clearing a camp

site, building log cabins, a storage building and cook shack. On the blueprints of the railroad this point would be known as Tunnel.

The long cold spell broke two days after Cal's return to Warm Creek. Rain fell in a deluge as the warm moist air from the Pacific encountered the cold-glacier and interior-country air and condensed. The snow disappeared and floods spilled over the frozen ground, thawing it somewhat and making footing for man and horse difficult. Dressed in slickers and hip boots, the men continued their work. In the channel the ice began to honeycomb and Cold Creek could no longer be crossed with safety.

There was little left over there, anyway, except débris and foundation timbers. The piling would be pulled the following summer, Cal decided, unless the ice took it out before then.

As the rainy weather continued, a dogged attitude toward life settled on the camp. The second week the men began talking about the arrival of the next steamer. Cal grinned. It was sure proof that his boom town was there to stay, the steamer's arrival being an event more important than a national holiday. Men began hailing him every time he appeared on the street.

"When's the next steamer, Cal?" they inquired. "Will it bring mail? I could sure enjoy a letter from home."

Cal couldn't be definite in his answers. He didn't want to raise hopes only to have them dashed because of the uncertainty of the weather. "It's a case of W. P.," he usually replied.

That was plain talk to the average Alaskan. The magic letters appearing on most of the freight

shipped North meant, "Weather Permitting." Weather permitting the freight would be discharged. If the weather willed otherwise, the freight would remain aboard. It might even make another trip to Seattle if the shipment wasn't heavy enough to justify holding over the steamer.

Early one morning Cal was awakened by an almost musical sound. It stirred the echoes and vibrations among the mountain peaks. Blue Glacier answered by dropping a chunk of ice big as a five-story building as the vibration started a slide.

"That's the *Narada's* whistle!" Cal shouted. He rolled out of his bunk and Caboose tumbled from his. Nathan was slower, for he had to grope for his glasses.

"Blinder'n a bat," he grumbled, "but there's nothing wrong with my ears. I can hear that whistle, all right."

They ran outside. Every cabin was emptying men who were pulling on clothes as they ran. The *Narada* was smashing through the rotten ice, which tumbled back like sod from a plow until the steamer could go no farther. Then she backed away and charged again. She kept right on charging until she had smashed a lane into Warm Creek.

An improvised gangway was quickly constructed. The purser hurried down with his papers, and behind him came a dozen chattering girls. Their cheeks were rosy from the cold rain and wind, their eyes bright with excitement. Stewards followed with their bags, which were promptly picked up by members of Cal's construction crew.

"We've been waitin' for you," one of them said. "Hey, Marcia, here're

Continued on page 108

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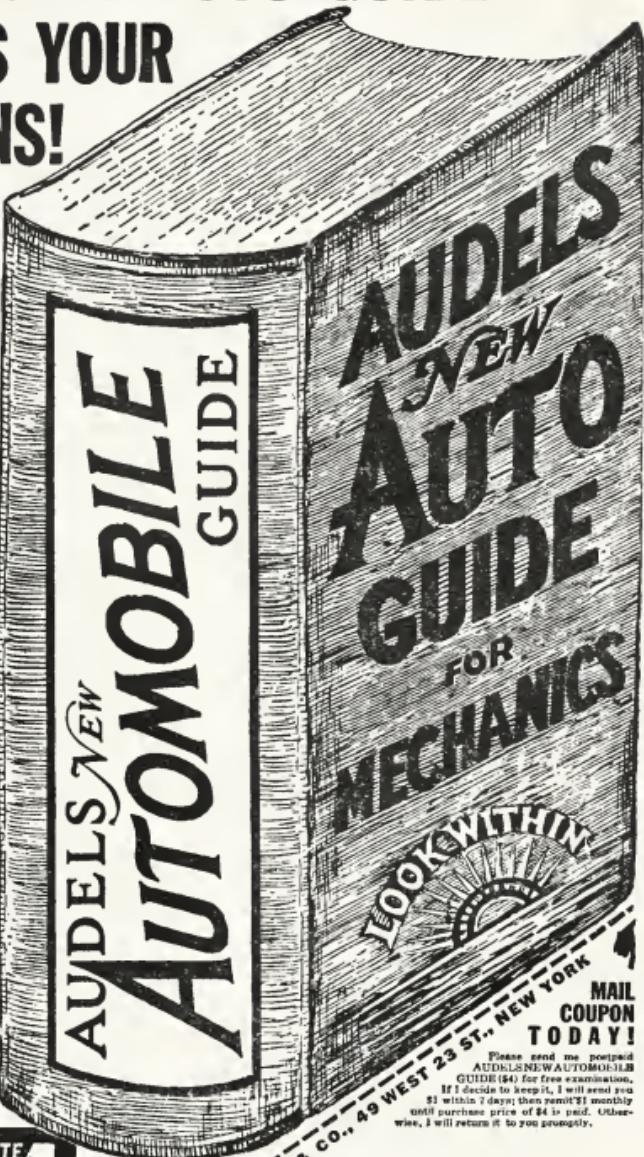
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WILD WEST WEEKLY
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Continued from page 106
your girls. Now we can have that housewarmin'."

Marcia, wearing knee-length rubber boots, came splashing through the muck. Most of the girls were old friends. They had worked with her in the Skidroad Blue Moon and were following her North to make the stake they hoped would spell independence. Marcia led the way to the Blue Moon, while the volunteer baggage carriers trooped along after the girls.

A harried man came off the Narada and told Cal he had been appointed postmaster. "Have you got a post office yet?" he asked hopefully. "I've got several sacks of mail, and all the necessary things to do business."

"No post office yet," Cal answered. "We'll build you one tomorrow. Right now, though, you can have a corner in the Blue Moon to distribute mail."

"Here's a letter for you that was handed to me just as the boat sailed," the postmaster said.

Cal walked to the nearest shelter, tore open the envelope, and read:

DEAR CAL:

I hear they're outsmarting you up there. My nephew, Dan, came down with Gorst and the others. He said your boat's boiler quit, she was stranded and Gorst beat you to the townsite. I am told that Gorst has laid rails on the snow in Windy Gap, which blocks your railroad from using the Gap.

Dan showed me a power of attorney he made with the miners in Poor Man's Hell. He said you would have to do business with him or not at all. He is having a contract drawn up for you to sign—a contract with teeth in it.

There were other straws showing which way the wind is blowing. It looks bad for you, Cal. They're throwing rocks at you, and your scalp is bleeding. Pretty soon you'll get so mad you'll start crying.

All this, I know, is calculated to undermine my faith in you. And I am showing my lack of faith by chartering a big freighter to keep you supplied with rails and other material you'll need; also a port-

able sawmill for tie cutting; and sufficient gold and currency to pay off the men to date. Keep me posted.

Yours truly,
GID RILEY.

Now there was a letter, Cal thought. It warmed him all over. The old man was confident he would pull the fat out of the fire in the long run, and he was showing his confidence by going all the way.

AS Cal folded his letter and put it into his pocket, Dan Riley walked briskly down the gangway, carrying a leather bag. He looked somewhat bewildered. "I'm all turned around. South seems to be north," he complained.

"Your sense of direction hasn't failed you," Cal told him. He could not help feeling a certain satisfaction at Dan's confusion. "We had a cold spell, the ice thickened, and we skidded our town across the Inlet. We thought as long as Gorst had abandoned it, we might as well take the spot."

Dan Riley looked around him in amazement, then ran a few steps because the steamer was obstructing his view. "This will astonish Mr. Gorst," he said reluctantly.

"It might even flabbergast him," Cal suggested.

Dan shook his head, his usual assurance returning. "We'll beat you in the long run," he said. "I have a contract in my bag which you'll have to sign before you can do a stroke of business in Poor Man's Hell."

"Bring it over to the hotel and we'll look at it," Cal answered. "It isn't much of a hotel yet—I named it the Riley House after your uncle—but it will be a big one some day."

Caboose came over and greeted his brother with a friendly, "Hello, Dan!"

Dan's greeting was terse and cold. "Hello," he said, without offering to shake hands.

Caboose flushed. It was apparent that Dan's coolness had hurt him and made him thoroughly angry. "We could keep this a clean fight," he suggested ironically.

"You're a damned fool," Dan retorted. "I've tried to make something out of you, but it's no use. Can't you see that working for Jessup won't get you anywhere? What chance has he against a man with Gorst's experience?"

"Not much, from the way you talk," Caboose admitted. "But I'm sticking, so you may as well get used to the idea." He walked off, leaving Dan looking after him with an exasperated expression.

Dan and Cal walked together to the hotel. In Cal's room Dan opened his bag and spread out various documents on a pine table. It was evident, with all his confident talk about winning in the long run, he wanted Cal's signature badly.

Cal tilted back in his chair and began to read a contract made and entered into between Dan Riley, as attorney, for a group of miners in Poor Man's Hell, and Cal Jessup, superintendent of the Riley Construction Co.

In return for rights of way and the promise of certain tonnage at a specified rate on the part of the miners, the Riley Construction Co. agreed to deliver, not later than February 1st of the following year, two train loads of heavy dredging machinery, a ball mill to be used by a hard-rock company, and other listed equipment and supplies.

"Why February 1st?" Cal inquired.

"The owners of the mill and dredge machinery will have to freight it over swampy ground,"

Dan explained. "This must be completed before the thaw. They can't risk an early break-up and for that reason February 1st is the absolute limit."

"That's very reasonable," Cal admitted blandly, "and on the surface it seems fair enough. But I notice you're charging the miners a whacking big freight rate. Why this generosity to the Riley Construction Co.?"

Dan looked a little taken back. "I thought the rate a very fair one, considering the hazards and costs of building the road."

"Putting two and two together," said Cal, "it looks as if you expect me to go broke. Then Gorst is to pick up the remains at a receiver's sale for a song, build the line and shake down the miners on freight charges. You weren't, by any chance, thinking of a Gorst-operated line when you made those rates were you?"

Dan's face turned an angry red. "No," he said curtly.

"Later on," Cal told him, "I may want to borrow money and the bankers will insist on proof that we're going to get tonnage. Therefore, this contract is necessary to my business and I'll sign. But you aren't fooling me, Dan; that contract is full of sharp teeth!"

CHAPTER XI

JOHN LAW

ALL day long pack horses, rails, lumber and supplies poured from the *Narada's* holds. The steerage disgorged additional workmen, and as soon as they had established themselves in a temporary tent city they joined the others in handling cargo.

The purser turned a small strong box over to Cal.

"The construction crew pay roll is inside," he said, "and Mr. Riley sent a paymaster with the combination to the lock."

"We'll have a pay day as soon as cargo is discharged," Cal declared.

Over at the Blue Moon, Marcia was finishing her preparations for the grand opening and the postponed housewarming. The big building had the clean fragrance of recently sawed wood, and here and there drops of golden pitch oozed from cracks. Marcia had leased the drinking and gambling concessions to men who knew that angle of the business and she had brought along her Skidroad bouncers to keep the boys in order.

The afternoon of the grand opening, Cal's paymaster posted a notice for the men to draw their money to date.

Marcia saw the line and when she met Cal she stopped him smilingly. "I could hug you for that, Cal," she said.

"There're no fences around me," Cal observed dryly. "But what have I done that rates a hugging?"

"Paying the men off just before my opening," she answered. "We'll have a big night now for sure. And I'll never forget it. Will you be there?"

"Nothing could keep me away," Cal assured her.

He dropped in an hour before the curtain went up and found the place packed. The bar was doing a land-office business and men were jammed around the roulette wheels. Marcia had used care in giving out the gambling concession. The operators were square gamblers content with the percentage in their favor, men who knew good will is as important in gambling as in other lines of business.

Cal shoved his way in, and found

Caboose in the front row. "For once you aren't bringing up the rear, eh?" he observed.

"I saw you were busy," Caboose explained, "so I saved this seat for you. I have to work tonight. Hurley wants a pack-train load of drill steel and grub sent up to Tunnel. I'm leaving early in the morning. Business before pleasure, like they say in the success books."

CAL took the seat and watched Caboose fight his way to the nearest door. The kid was destined to go places if he kept up his present stride. He'd make old Gid proud of him yet. Cal knew Caboose was starved for a little pleasure and that he had looked forward eagerly to the opening. Like most men in camp he had a mild crush on Marcia. It must have required real self-discipline for him to pass by the evening's excitement.

For that matter, Hurley and the other drillers weren't spending any time in town. They had to drive a tunnel through the obstructing ridge before the boys laying steel reached them sometime during the summer.

But Cal himself found it hard to relax. Gradually he forgot the stifling air and the press of bodies around him as he began to measure his responsibilities. The weight was staggering.

This was the biggest thing he had ever attempted. It was even bigger than the hard-rock proposition he had planned down in the Rio Paloma country. So far he had been lucky, but there were some angles that worried him. The three empty shotgun shells, for instance.

Who had fired them, and at what target? Then there was Herb Wise's body down in the morgue. As soon as John Law arrived there would be an investigation. He wondered what would develop.

As for the job itself, Cal knew he wasn't having the maximum responsi-

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sibility thrust upon him all at once. It was something that would come by degrees. The men and equipment involved would increase gradually.

Suddenly Cal woke to the fact that the men were stamping and cheering as the curtain went up. Twelve girls in brief, glittering costumes, danced out of the wings and went into their act. Then Marcia appeared. Had there been silence, she would have managed nicely enough. But the men all knew she had been operating on a shoe string in an effort to give them good entertainment. They knew how hard she had worked, and when she came out on the stage they nearly tore the roof off, because they admired her.

For a moment Marcia was too deeply moved to sing. The man at the piano had played the prelude several times. At last Marcia regained control of herself and sang. The wildly applauding house demanded encore after encore. When she came out with her girls in the finale, a shower of coins deluged them.

Later, Cal knocked on the door to Marcia's dressing room. She opened it, her face radiant. "Cal," she exclaimed, "I've more money here than I ever saw before—and I can thank you for it."

"You can thank yourself for putting on a good show," Cal answered. "Take my advice and put that dough into the old sock and keep it."

"That's what I plan to do," Marcia said happily.

"The *Narada* sails tomorrow night," Cal told her. "Tell your girls if they want to write letters home they had better get busy."

"They'll do more than write," Marcia assured him. "They'll send money home!"

It was two in the morning when Cal went to his cabin and turned in. It had been an exciting eve-

ning, but he knew there would be even more exciting days in the future. The real excitement would come when the first train entered Poor Man's Hell. Then, he knew, people would go mad. "The old iron malemute will make plenty of dreams come true," he reflected, "unless I ball everything up, and Gorst gets the road."

MOST of the camp rolled out early the following morning to write letters and talk of the previous night's celebration. But only a few emerged early enough to see Caboose move through town with a long pack train of steel drills and supplies. Cal was on hand to wish Caboose and his men luck. It was the boy's first chance as straw boss, and Cal knew how he felt.

"Get back again as soon as you can," said Cal. "There's a schooner due with a load of powder." Cal went back to the cabin and found Nathan Land was up and making out a list of things he wanted shipped North. "The kid's gone, and I'm glad, Nathan," he said soberly. "When he's idle he keeps brooding over Herb Wise's death. I'm expecting John Law to show up any time and make an investigation. I wish we had an expert in gunshot wounds up here."

"Why not send for Doc Hill?" Nathan suggested. "He could probably use a vacation, and if there's anything queer about Wise's death, he'll spot it."

"He wouldn't leave Gid Riley," Cal argued.

"How do you know? Write him and find out," Nathan advised.

So, when the *Narada* sailed she carried a letter from Cal Jessup to Doc Hill.

The schooner sailed up the Inlet a few hours after the *Narada*'s de-

parture. Her skipper, with amazing skill, drove his craft deep into the hole in the ice left by the steamer. He sent a line ashore, took a turn around the capstan and his men, manning the capstan and singing a chanty, warped the schooner into the creek. The skipper reported that he had a cargo of dynamite aboard that would have to be handled with care.

Horses harnessed to heavy drays hauled loads to the powder house which had been located outside of the town. From this point it would be carried by pack train to Tunnel, or points where lesser rock work was necessary.

Before the schooner had discharged all its cargo, another steamer arrived, carrying a staggering load of materials and men looking for jobs. Cal set up more tents, enlarged the company dining room, and put the new men to work.

Crews kept the pile driver going day and night, completing wharves. Cal was making no attempt to lay rails on the main line. That would have meant working half-frozen dirt, an expensive proposition. But Cal built the freight yards and sidings, and laid tracks on the wharves as soon as they were planked.

Another steamer, one of the regular ones, put in and tied up the day the wharf was ready for landings. It dropped mail, window bars, and steel doors for the jail, and a tight-lipped, grim-faced man who called himself John Law. The new commissioner followed him down the gangplank. Last of all came Tuck Gorst and his man Shultz.

The latter was still in a highly nervous state of mind as a result of his experience with the Riley gang, but Gorst spoke sharply and bucked up his courage somewhat.

The two seemed to be on friendly terms with the new deputy marshal.

JOHN LAW introduced himself to Cal and for a moment the latter found himself shaking hands mechanically and speculating on Gorst's reactions to the sight of the town site he had once abandoned. The man's poker face betrayed nothing.

"What was that you said?" Cal asked when he realized John Law was staring at him as if waiting for an answer.

"I asked you where I'd find Herb Wise's body," Law said impatiently.

"In the morgue we rigged up," Cal answered. "We've kept it below freezing."

"In that case I'll leave it there for the present," Law declared. "I want to get organized first. Besides, the commissioner will have his hands full getting settled. Where can I put up the jail?"

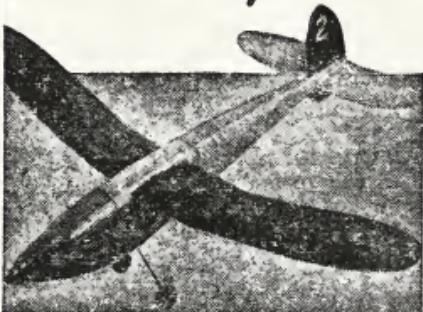
"You can have any vacant lot you want off the main street," Cal answered. "The price is one dollar. We're anxious to see law and order established here. Ask for anything you need. I'll put up a jail and lease it to you if you want."

"I'm prepared to build my own jail," Law told him. "While I think of it, Jessup, I want you to keep your men in hand. I'm thinking particularly of Shultz. They tried to mob him—"

"And with damned good reason," Cal interrupted sharply. "He substituted a low-melting-point plug in the crown sheet, stranded the *Narada* and lost us this town site temporarily. We can't prove it, of course, but it's the truth. I'll instruct the boys to lay off, though. Why is Shultz here, anyway?"

"The Riley Construction Co. may own the townsite," John Law said loftily, "but it can't decide who shall

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live here and who shall not. Shultz, or anyone else having business here, or thinking he has, may come and go as he pleases under the full protection of the Federal government. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," said Cal.

"Then make your men understand it. The Riley House is a public hotel, and—"

"Oh, I realize that," Cal interrupted again. "Shultz, Gorst, and anyone else can stay there if they want to. But there's something I want to make quite clear: Tuck Gorst is out to block this railroad. If he pulls any underhanded stuff, I won't come running to you. I'll hit back while I can, and tell you about it afterward."

Cal strode away with the feeling that he had made a poor start with John Law. The following morning he called in his rapidly increasing number of straw bosses.

"No rough stuff with Shultz," he warned them. "He'll get his medicine in due time. If we get tough now, we're playing into Gorst's hands. The new deputy marshal, John Law, is a mighty tough bird. You might let the boys know that, too."

CHAPTER XII

A COUNCIL OF WAR

CAL'S original crew was pretty well scattered by this time, and the men hired later knew little or nothing of the melted crown-sheet plug and stranding of the *Narada*. Besides, Hurley and the hard-rock men were all at Tunnel now, punching holes in a ridge.

Had the hard-rock men been in town, it is probable they would have scorned John Law's warning, given Shultz a thorough working over, then faced the consequences. The absence of his former fellow passen-

gers on the *Narada*, plus the marshal's protection, heartened Shultz considerably. He not only walked the streets with growing contempt for the Jessup men, but he spent much of his time in the Blue Moon, dancing with Marcia's girls.

Gorst and Shultz were stopping in the best rooms in the Riley House, and the former let it be known he was interested in buying mining claims and developing prospects anywhere in the area the railroad would tap.

The camp had settled to calm, everyday life. Caboose delivered the steel and supplies at Tunnel, then returned to camp and informed Cal that the hard-rock men were yelling for powder.

"Have you got those pack mules calmed down yet?" Cal asked.

"I learned that plenty of hard work calms down mules," Caboose answered, "and they've been getting it."

"How's the trail? Need any work done on it?"

"There are a couple of places where the slides are bad," Caboose answered. "I've a hunch you'll have to build snowsheds there, or keep a snowplow ready."

"I suppose you mean along Bald Mountain," said Cal.

"That's right. It wouldn't take much to start that snow moving," Caboose explained. "The vibration of a passing locomotive would be sure to turn the trick. But that's ahead. I keep a sharp lookout when I pass that way." He grinned. "It's a good place on the trail to do a man dirt."

"Shultz is in camp. Don't start anything," Cal warned.

"I saw him. He was shining up to Marcia. I'd like to have punched his face in," Caboose declared hotly.

Cal realized he might have a love-

sick youngster on his hands if he wasn't careful. Not that he blamed Caboose for falling in love with Marcia. But young fellows that age take love seriously and settle problems with violence.

"You keep away from him," he advised.

"I don't like the look he gave me," said Caboose. "A kind of a smug, boasting look, like he knew something he wasn't telling."

Cal thought of John Law and the coming inquest. If Shultz or some other Gorst man popped up as a witness it would be proof of something in the wind. But there was no use worrying about that yet.

"When do you want to start packing in the powder?" he asked.

"They have to have it right away," Caboose answered. "I plan to start the pack train moving early in the morning."

The camp had a bit of excitement when Caboose and his explosives moved through the main street the following morning. One of the mules tried to buck off his cases of dynamite, and the lives of those in the vicinity of the pack train were shortened by several years.

Most of the crowd scattered, fearing an explosion. Among them was Dan Riley, who was walking with Gorst.

"There should be a law passed requiring all powder shipments to go around the outskirts of town!" Dan exclaimed. "That fool brother of mine never did have any sense. He needs a good, old-fashioned hiding."

"I doubt if you could give it to him," Gorst observed dryly. "By the way, Dan, can you ride a horse?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Just wanted to know," replied Gorst. "I'm having a saddle string shipped in, so we can get around in

a hurry when trail conditions will allow it. They'll arrive tomorrow. Get Shultz and come up to my room. There are some things I want to talk over."

So far as Gorst was concerned his mind was already made up, but he invariably discussed matters with his men. It flattered them, and they felt they had a hand in the decisions that were made.

FIRST, Dan," Gorst asked when the two were settled in his room, "if your fool brother, as you call him, should commit a crime, what would be your attitude?"

"The fact that he's my brother would make no difference at all," Dan answered, with the firmness of a man who has the highest opinion of his own convictions.

"The marshal is ordering an inquest over Wise's remains and your brother's name may be brought into it," Gorst explained. "A mere rumor, no doubt, but I've learned it pays to anticipate bad news. Preparation lessens the shock."

"If the boy could be frightened out of the country," Dan suggested, "it might save complications. He has some foolish idea he's being loyal to my uncle and Cal Jessup, you see. It may lead him into an attempt to upset our plans."

"I doubt if he can upset our plans," said Gorst. "They can stand a lot of upsetting and still break Jessup. Now, Dan, are you positive the contract you made with him calling for delivery of two train loads of freight by February 1st will hold water?"

"Absolutely," Dan answered. "I had a darned good lawyer draw it up. Our job, now, is to see that Jessup doesn't make delivery."

"Don't worry, I've arranged obstacles he never dreamed of," Gorst

said. "Suppose, for example, there should be a gold strike up here. How long do you suppose Jessup's crew would stay on the job working for wages?"

"Not very long, I'm afraid," Dan answered.

"The majority would drop their picks and shovels and be off. In fact, they'd probably take their picks and shovels with them," Gorst predicted. "And that's just one of the things that could happen. Jessup still has to come to me if he wants to lay steel in Windy Gap."

"That was a clever trick, laying rails on the snow," Dan observed. He was seeing, for the first time, the resourcefulness of a clever man. And he was impressed. It was something far beyond the conservative, well-ordered life he had known to date. He suddenly realized his uncle, too, must be a remarkable man to have made a fortune in spite of such opposition.

WHEN Gorst had milked Dan dry of ideas and opinions, he dismissed him and turned to Shultz.

"Now that we're rid of him," Gorst said, "let's get down to business. How many of our men have you planted in Jessup's crews?"

"I planted most of them while they were being organized in Seattle," Shultz replied. "I've checked up since I got back here. There's one man with the drillers at Tunnel. One was with the portable sawmill cutting railroad ties, but he was fired. There's a dozen more scattered through other crews. They're keepin' their eyes open and their mouths shut. In case there's . . . er . . . a stampede each is ready to lead his own pack."

"I wish we could slow down that job at Tunnel," Gorst said thoughtfully. "Gid Riley judges a man by results. If he gets a report that so

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many feet of rock has been drilled and blasted, he's impressed. He knows he's got the right man on the job. And, according to information I've picked up, Hurley is making a good record."

"There's a pack-train load of powder on the way," Shultz reminded him. "Caboose Riley is in charge. Things are quiet here. Why not sneak out tonight and look over the situation? I know of one thing that can be done with powder."

"What?"

"We can start a hell of a snow-slide," Shultz answered.

Gorst nodded, his eyes glittering. "Then we'll start it," he said softly. "You arrange the details, Shultz. Can you get blasting powder without attracting attention? John Law seems to be on our side, still we can't arouse too much suspicion."

"We've got a man planted among those on duty at the powder house," Shultz explained. "He'll see to that end of it. Shall we take the ten-gauge shotgun and a few special shells along?"

Gorst nodded. "Also a few loaded with buckshot in case we should get into fast action at close range—though I'm not anticipating that."

GORST and Shultz left at four o'clock the following morning. Their horses made fair time for the mules had packed down the trail considerably. Late in the afternoon the two men sighted the pack train moving slowly ahead of them.

That night Gorst and Shultz led their horses around the sleeping camp and cut back to the trail again. It was snowing steadily, and the hoofmarks of their horses vanished within an hour after they were made. The two men took turns in breaking trail. Part of the time one of them walked to save the horses, and when the snow was heavy, both walked.

They sighted Bald Mountain late that afternoon and made camp. The following morning they rode to a point a half mile from the trail and left their horses. Luck was with them; it was still snowing and blowing. Not a track was visible behind them. All they saw was a smooth, unbroken expanse of new snow. Carrying the powder, they climbed a short distance up Bald Mountain's lowest slope. The trail skirted it a thousand feet below.

Gorst worked his way slowly back and forth, studying the great drifts and trying to determine the point where pressure from above was greatest.

"There's the toe of the biggest snowfield," Shultz said, pointing. "A jolt there will start things."

"All right, place your powder," Gorst ordered. "Don't use it all. We may need some for a second jolt."

Shultz understood explosives. He burrowed down until he struck ice that curved toward a cliff. Remembering that most of the force would be downward, he chopped a hole in the ice, placed his powder, then, uncoiling the fuse, brought the end to the surface. When the slide started, any footprints they had left would be wiped out.

The job done, the pair settled down to the business of waiting. It was a good time to hold another council of war and Gorst opened it. "John Law is holding an inquest over Herb Wise's body when we get back," he said. "You're to be the principal witness."

"But I don't like to come out in the open," Shultz protested. "They know I put that low-melting-point plug in that crown sheet, and they ain't forgettin' it. Now if I testify in the Wise case, I'm liable to make more enemies."

"That's what we're here for—to make enemies, then beat them," Gorst said coldly. "You know all about Wise's death and can't be tripped up on facts. If I take some other fellow and coach him on his testimony, a smart lawyer will be able to tangle him up."

"Wise was a damned fool!" Shultz muttered.

"I'm not arguing that. But he was within his rights and stood by them," declared Gorst. "And don't forget it'll go damned hard with the guilty party if he's caught," he added significantly.

"All right! All right!" Shultz snarled. "Quit bearin' down on me."

"Don't forget who you're talking to." The words dropped from Gorst's mouth like sharp-pointed icicles. "Tell me again what happened. I want to be in full possession of the true facts. Then if you slip I can help you out."

"Wise wouldn't let us lay rails on the snow, you'll remember, so we pulled our freight and made out we was givin' up," Shultz said sullenly. "He follows to make sure we ain't up to somethin'. I double back, as you ordered, then close in on him. He's got a rifle and shotgun. The shotgun's loaded with buckshot. While I was thinkin' what'd happen if he blasted me, Wise turned and saw me. You know, some men have hunches. They feel danger like animals. Wise was that kind."

"I warned you on that point," Gorst commented dryly.

"Well, I . . . I shot him. He never moved after he fell," Shultz continued. "Then I look over the lower country with glasses and see Caboose Riley havin' trouble with his mules. Two of 'em had stampeded. I figger he's wanderin'

around Caribou Valley tryin' to find 'em."

"That was logical, mules being worth considerable at this stage of their operations," Gorst said. His words were clipped—precise. He was a colonel talking to a buck private.

"I rode down to his camp, got his rifle and rode back to Herb Wise's body. It was froze stiff by that time. I walked up close, like a man would if he wanted to make sure of a killin', and fired twice. Then I dug the first bullet out of his back. After that I rode back and left the rifle where I'd found it. Caboose was still huntin' mules. He hadn't got back to his camp that night. Then I went back and we laid them rails on the snow."

"You've told me what happened five times now," Gorst said, "and I guess your memory is clear. You'll know what *not* to say at the inquest. Now I'll tell you what *to* say."

GORST talked at length as the day wore on. Both he and Shultz kept their eyes on the point where the pack train was due to appear, but it was late afternoon before Caboose Riley rode into view. There was another rider with him.

"Say, look," Shultz exclaimed. "There's Jessup. What's he doin' with the train? He was in town when we left. He must smell a rat."

"Calm down," Gorst admonished. "The chances are things are quiet in Warm Creek and he decided to go over the trail, now that the train had packed it down, and inspect operations at Tunnel. That's what I'd do if I were bossing the job. Well—" His eyes flashed. "I don't know who I'd rather bury under a few tons of snow than Jessup. Shultz, your nerves are on edge. I

think I'll light the fuse this time. You might bungle it."

The plodding pack train followed the two riders. At regular intervals other mounted men kept a watchful eye on the animals, ready to quiet them should something startle them. As the entire train came into view, the two riders stopped and conferred. They looked calculatingly at Bald Mountain, then back at the train.

"They know something's wrong," Shultz said worriedly. "Let's get the hell out of here before they start snoopin' 'round."

"What've you got that shotgun for," Gorst demanded, "if it isn't to send snoopers about their business? Plenty of new snow has fallen, and Jessup is probably telling the kid that there'll be less chance of a slide tomorrow morning when it's colder. Look. They're making camp."

The long line of mules, occasionally obscured by snow flurries, came out of the snow-burdened timber. Ears flipped forward, heads up, they looked at Bald Mountain as if realizing the danger of slides.

"Now we're stuck here," Shultz complained. "Nothin' to eat but cold grub. We'll have to keep warm in our sleepin' bags, I suppose. No chance of buildin' a fire now."

"None in the world," Gorst agreed cheerfully. "Do you know where we can find Sluice-box Charley?"

Shultz stared at Gorst as if the man had gone crazy. What had Sluice-box Charley to do with a night spent in a cold camp? "Sure, Charley's old pardner is takin' care of him," he answered patiently. "He's crazier'n a loon and deaf as a post. You have to yell your head off to make him hear you. Even then, he don't understand because he's old and childish."

"Charley's just the man I need,

then," Gorst said mysteriously. "Deaf, childish—and a prospector. As soon as we're through here, we'll go on and look after the little hard-rock business I mentioned. After that, I want you to smuggle Sluicibox Charley into Glacier Inlet, and keep him until we need him. Better cache him on Cold Creek. Nobody over there to ask questions."

"You sure are workin' a lot of angles to this business," Shultz grumbled. "What we done to the south bank on Icy Lake should be enough, it seems like."

"Well, it isn't."

They squirmed into their sleeping bags and, screened by a fringe of timber, watched operations below. Cal Jessup was cooking a meal while the others were cautiously unloading the dangerous freight and feeding the mules.

The odor of well-cooked food drifted up to tantalize Shultz. Gorst watched him with growing contempt. The man had served him many times and performed his work well enough. Gorst had hoped to increase his responsibility, and perhaps lighten his own burden in the coming months. Now he doubted if Shultz would be any good under extreme pressure. He was too inclined to think of himself, his personal comfort and safety, when he should be concentrating on the business at hand.

They both spent a restless night and were awake and eating half-frozen food when the camp below began stirring. It had stopped snowing, and the sky was partly clear. Below, a flaine flickered and the voices of hard-driving men came to their ears. There were lusty curses, much bantering and rough-housing.

"That Caboose has developed a fine spirit among his men," Gorst thought. "I wish I had him instead of Dan."

Gorst was well aware that a snow-



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slide wouldn't stop a railroad. But it would delay it, and possibly wipe out a key man or two. Enough delays of one kind or another might make Gid Riley sorry he had ever started.

CHAPTER XIII

PEPPERED WITH GOLD

IT seemed hours to the grumbling Shultz before they packed the animals. The sun was behind the clouds—the slanting dispirited sun of winter—when the train began to move, but there was ample daylight streaming through the breaks in the clouds to identify the men with the pack train.

"There they go," said Gorst. "Make up our packs and cache them on the hogback. We'll pick them up and run for our horses as soon as the slide has done its work. There'll be more snow today to cover our tracks. As soon as you cache the packs, come back. I may need help if something goes wrong. Got your shotgun loaded?"

"Yes—with buckshot."

"Don't get the buckshot shells mixed up with the special shells," Gorst warned.

"I won't."

Shultz disappeared with the packs, and Gorst made his way slowly to the fuse, which was marked by a stick. He looked down on the train. Cal Jessup was riding ahead, and because of the narrowness of the trail at this point, Caboose was immediately behind him. Cal had just entered the slide area when Gorst touched a match to the fuse and watched it a moment. It spluttered away satisfactorily, burning down into the snow and sending up a spiraling bit of grayish smoke. Then, his work done, Gorst broke into a trot, cleared the slide area, and stopped to await the result.

Several moments passed while he crouched, tense. The day was silent

except for the faint creak of pack-saddle straps, the muffled sound of hoofs against snow, and the occasional swish of an up-moving branch as it shed its burden of snow.

The snow-covered ground under Gorst shook suddenly. There was a muffled report that might have been exploding powder or snow tearing loose from a mountain slope. All at once the toe of the great slide heaved outward, like the feet of a heavy man falling on a steep, icy path.

Cal shouted a warning. His voice came clear and sharp on the crisp air. "Slide! Ride, boys!"

They all turned and started to make for the bottom land below. There was no chance to ride ahead nor turn back. The trail ahead meant additional danger from the slide. Retreat was cut off because of the crowded trail.

Cal sent his horse at break-neck speed down the slope. He rode relaxed, his feet out of the stirrups, so he would be thrown clear if his horse went down. He hit the bottom lands and looked back.

Caboose's horse had fallen and was rolling over and over. The boy, his foot caught in the stirrup, went with it. Cal turned back to give him a hand just as the saddle cinch parted, freeing the horse, but leaving Caboose entangled with the saddle.

"Keep on going, Cal!" Caboose shouted. "You can come back and dig me out."

In a flash Cal realized this was sound logic. He couldn't get back up the slope in time to be of much help. And if he were caught in the slide, there would be no one to dig out the others. Just then the slide struck a mule and knocked him high into the air. The animal landed on a boulder and a powder case broke

open, scattering the sticks. Miraculously, there was no explosion.

LOOKING up to determine the slide's course, Cal saw a faint trace of powder smoke. "Then that was a blast!" he said savagely. "Whoever touched it off is up there." A quick glance around showed all his men in the clear, though some horses swallowed belly-deep in the snow and their riders were having a hard time to free them.

Cal put his horse through the bottom-land thickets on the dead run, turned and began climbing the slope. He planned to ride as far as possible, dismount and proceed on foot with the hope of trailing the dynamiter.

He jumped off as his horse was trapped in a drift well clear of the slide area. As he looked around to decide on the quickest way to the top, he saw a block of ice weighing at least a ton break free from the slope and roll down. He bellowed a warning through cupped hands. The others saw what was happening and scattered. They were well clear of sliding snow, but were still endangered by leaping ice and boulders.

The ice smashed into exposed rock fifty feet above the slide-covered trail, and shattered. A hundred-pound chunk crashed squarely against a mule. The mule and its load of powder dissolved in a deafening blast. It was incredible. One instant Cal saw the flying block of ice and the mule. The next there was a hole in the snow and everything in the vicinity had vanished.

Another mule lay flat on his side struggling to regain his feet. A second was staggering around, jarred off balance by the wind of the blast. Every loose mass of snow on the slope started moving. High on the

mountainside, Cal could see the snow breaking away, leaving ragged edges of packed snow and solid ice exposed.

Several thousand tons of snow were moving to the bottom lands. Cal looked from the bottom lands to the mountain once more and caught a faint movement out of the corner of his eye. Hastily he blazed away with his six-gun and someone howled. Cal dropped, eyes alert for the faintest movement. A shotgun roared and buckshot ripped through the brush immediately above his head. Cal cried out violently, but when this ruse failed to trick the other man into exposing himself, he rushed for the protection of a half-exposed rock. He fired at a movement in the brush, more to discourage immediate attack on himself than with any hope of hitting the mark.

There was a second's lull, then Cal heard a click as the other closed the breach of his shotgun. "Don't fire that load," a voice warned sharply.

The gun blasted and bits of metal ripped into Cal's flesh. Parts of his body grew numb under the impact. There was a confusion of roars—the roar of snow, of guns and of men in action. Cal hurled himself backward and rolled down the slope. He piled up in a thicket, and in a dazed sort of way remembered not to move. If someone was intent on finishing him, he would be finished. And there was nothing he could do about it. If he deceived the other into thinking he was dead, he might have a chance.

He looked at the sky and watched it grow darker, watched the tree-tops blur and blackness press in on all sides. Grimly he fought against unconsciousness. His hearing, the last of his senses to yield to uncon-

sciousness, lingered briefly. Someone was firing a .30-30 rifle rapidly. He wasn't sure, but he thought the bullets droned a few feet above him. One of his men must be shooting.

WHEN he opened his eyes Cal was looking into the white, frightened face of a packer. "The second slide caught Caboose and another one of the boys," the man explained. "The other, Pete I think it was, went down. Caboose got him by the arm and was draggin' him along when a mass of snow as big as a house smothered 'em both."

"Why didn't you dig them out?" demanded Cal.

"Couldn't. We had no shovels and more snow came down. And I ain't even exactly sure where they are," said the packer. "I was emptyin' my .30-30 into the brush above," he explained. "I was afraid them buzzards might finish you off. One of 'em was shootin' buckshot. They pulled out, and I went up the slope to see what I could do for you."

"I guess I'm all right," Cal said. "You're peppered with buckshot," exclaimed the packer. "It's a wonder you didn't bleed to death. Your skin parka kind o' slowed down the shot, I guess. I went up above to where the cuss had hid. Maybe it was foolish, but I was kind o' crazy mad. I thought I might see him hightailin' it out of the country. I found this." He displayed an empty shotgun shell.

Cal took the shell and looked at it carefully. He had seen similar shells on another occasion—blowing along the surface of Icy Lake. He recalled that voice warning, "Don't fire that load." In the excitement the man with the shotgun must have put the wrong shell into the weapon. But, wrong or not, it had

laid him low for the moment.

"Did you recognize any of the voices?" he asked.

"It seemed like I'd heard both of 'em somewhere before," the packer answered. "But they was disguisin' 'em."

Cal faced a difficult situation. Movement of any kind started his wounds to bleeding again, and he couldn't stand too great a loss of blood. On the other hand he didn't relish the idea of men aiding him when Caboose and one of the packers might be rescued from the slide, though he knew the chances of their surviving were tragically slim. But slides did queer things. And it wasn't uncommon for a man to find himself in an air pocket from which he could be rescued if those who escaped acted swiftly.

He called the survivors about him. "Make a quick check and see if you can locate the approximate spot they were caught," he directed. "Then dig with sticks, or with your hands."

They departed, to return a half-hour later with word that they could find no trace of the buried men. A large force would be needed to locate the bodies.

Cal sent a packer back to Warm Creek for men and equipment, and another to Tunnel, which was nearer, for immediate aid. The rest of the men kept a fire going, cared for the surviving mules, and explored the slide, hoping against hope that they would find some trace of the missing men. Probing with long poles was risky work, because there was always the chance of a pole exploding a stick of powder.

The packer riding Cal's horse had the advantage. He pounded over a packed trail and arrived at Warm Creek, while the other was still fighting his way through drifts to Tunnel.

Nathan Land was in the com-

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pany office and received the news of the slide. Within five minutes he had men running their legs off, getting an expedition organized. "We'll need a doctor," the packer reminded.

"There's a doctor coming on the steamer tomorrow," Nathan answered. "Doc Hill, a friend of Cal's. You'd better rest up and as soon as the steamer ties up be ready to take Doc to the slide. We'll leave two good saddle horses here."

Within an hour after the packer's arrival, several dozen men were moving over the trail. Dan Riley, learning what had happened, stormed into the office for details. When Nathan had told him all he knew about the accident, Dan said coldly, "I'll never forgive Cal Jessup for exposing my brother to such danger. He's to blame for this."

"You had better revise your viewpoint on that and a lot of other things," Nathan answered. "Go along with the rescue party. Say, where's your sweet-scented friend, Tuck Gorst, and his man Friday?"

"They're on a prospecting trip," Dan replied stiffly. "Otherwise they'd be leading a rescue party of their own. They're fine men."

SOON men bound for the slide were scattered along the trail. The more powerful of them, built for endurance, forged ahead rapidly. The others followed, driving themselves, but trying to spread their strength over the trail and have sufficient in reserve to be of some use after their arrival.

Nathan Land rounded a bend in the trail and found Tuck Gorst and Bull Shultz sitting on their horses. "What's up?" Gorst inquired calmly. "A stampede?"

"A big slide," Nathan answered. "Caboose Riley and at least one other man were caught. Dan Riley is up front somewhere. I gave him one of the best horses in camp."

"We'll go up and see what we can do to help," Gorst said expansively. "I'd hoped this road could be built without loss of life."

"They never are," Nathan said. "You ought to know that. If Nature doesn't kill the builders, other men do." He peered hard through his thick lenses to note the effect of this observation, but Gorst's face was impassive.

No one thought of camping for the night. Most of the men were hard and fit, and good for forty-eight consecutive hours or longer in an emergency.

One by one they went to work on the slide as soon as they arrived. Cal, directing operations from a hastily improvised bunk sheltered by a canvas, had to warn the men repeatedly. In their enthusiasm and spurred by the belief that the missing men might still be alive, they made the snow fly. Cal was afraid a shovel might set off a case of powder and cause a heavy loss of life.

Dan Riley, reeling from the killing pace he had set himself, went to work and kept at it until he dropped. Men dragged him to a spot near Cal and gave him first aid.

"You should never have let the boy do this work," Dan told Cal.

"I expected that from you," Cal retorted. "The boy was doing work he wanted to do. And he lost his life trying to save another man's. Furthermore that slide was started by enemies of the Riley Construction Co."

Dan was silent and quite obviously unconvinced. He rested awhile and as soon as he felt better went to work again.

Others poured in and took the places of those who cracked under the physical strain. Gorst and Shultz rode boldly up to Cal Jessup, timing their arrival when several

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dozen men were within earshot.

"There's no love lost between us, as we both know, Jessup," Gorst said grandiloquently. "But at a time like this bad feeling should be put aside. We're here to do what we can, and to work under your orders."

He knew Cal's suspicions, but if he expected the foreman to blow up and make himself look bad in the eyes of others, he was disappointed. Cal's answer was as cool as Gorst's offer.

"It's what I expected of you, Gorst. Go ahead and do what you can. It will be appreciated. The same goes for you, Shultz."

The mules were uncovered and their packs removed. Men shook their heads and marveled at the fickleness of high explosives. Cases that should have blown up had withstood the slide's blows. And yet every man knew a carelessly

centrated on that area, confident that Caboose's remains were near. Dan Riley, gray with exhaustion, refused to leave the spot. When he was too exhausted to work he sat down and watched.

Cal watched him speculatively. Was the real Dan, reacting to a crisis, coming to the surface? Was the North awakening long-slumbering strength in Dan's character? Or was he basically a big man who was putting petty emotions aside and remembering his responsibility for his younger brother? Cal wasn't sure of any of the answers. But he did know that few men could be exposed to Caboose's enthusiasm for adventure, and his eagerness to measure up to his uncle's standard of manhood, and not love him.

Reluctantly the searchers reached the conclusion that Caboose's remains would not be uncovered until the summer's sun melted the snow.



handled stick might cause serious damage.

The Tunnel drillers arrived under Hurley and took over a section. A short time later they found the missing packer's body. Everyone con-

There were a hundred depressions the body could have been forced into by sheer pressure, and to search each one was an impossible task, involving the moving of thousands of tons of rock, ice, and snow.

GORST and Shultz came over to Cal and expressed their regret over the tragedy. Then they mounted their horses and rode slowly away.

"What does this do to the inquest?" Shultz asked.

"It makes things easier for us to lay Wise's death to Caboose Riley," replied Gorst. "He won't be here to deny the charge."

"Do you think Cal Jessup knows we started that slide?" Shultz inquired. "I've never seen such a look in any man's eyes. They burned right through me."

"He may," Gorst replied. He was thoughtful and serious. "Are you sure he didn't see you?"

"No. That's why I shot at him. I hoped the first shot would chase him back down the mountain," Shultz explained. "When it didn't, and he dropped, I loaded up again, and—"

"I know! I know," Gorst said testily. "And you shoved in the wrong shell. The question is, was he hit by the first or second shot? How do you know it wasn't the first shot that dropped him?"

"I don't," Shultz admitted. "I was upset—afraid he might spot me. And after what I done on the Narada—"

"Well, sit tight and see what happens," Gorst ordered. "In the meantime get hold of Sluice-box Charley and take him over to Cold Creek."

As they rode down the trail, Doc Hill passed them, riding a horse with plenty of spirit. Professionally he was worried over what he might find. But personally he was light-hearted and he felt fine. It seemed good to be on the frontier again, and away from his confining city practice.

"How are you, my boy?" he asked when he saw Cal.

"Pretty well peppered," Cal an-

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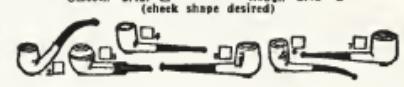
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swered ruefully. "My wounds are healing up, but they need your attention. I sent for you, however, to look after Caboose Riley's interests when the coroner's jury considered the Herb Wise case. There was a chance they'd hang the crime on him. But now—" He looked troubled. "He's under the slide."

"I know," Doc answered soberly. "They told me as I came over the trail. This will break Gid Riley all up. He was fond of Caboose."

"How is Gid?" asked Cal.

"Making good progress, now that you're running things up here," Doc Hill answered. "He was tickled pink when you skidded your whole damned town over to Warm Creek. Well, let's have a look at you."

He removed the bandages the boys had applied in their efforts to render first aid. Some of the smaller wounds were healing, but one area where several pellets moving in a close pattern had struck, looked bad.

"This isn't going to be pleasant, Cal," Doc warned, "but it's got to be done." He began probing with a scalpel and removing pellets which he dropped into an empty tomato tin. A queer expression spread over his face as he examined one of the pellets.

"What's wrong, Doc?" asked Cal. His face was white with the pain the probing was causing him.

"Well, son, you said you'd been peppered," Doc drawled, "but you diagnosed your case all wrong. You weren't peppered—you were salted. The pellets I'm taking out of your hide are gold nuggets!"

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